

Title: This is Good News?
Text: Luke 3: 7 – 18
Date: December 16, 2018

So there you have it. *Another* harsh Advent text with apocalyptic overtones. **“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”** (3:17) I bet you can’t wait for baby Jesus to be born!

Just for fun, I would like to give you the Reader’s Digest version of this story. Let’s hear simply the first and the last verse of this morning’s reading put together. **“John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ . . . So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”** (3:7, 18)

So my question to you is this: Does this sound like “good news” to you? Quick survey. How many of you like it when someone calls *you* a “brood of vipers? When someone berates you, is your first reaction to tell your friends of this good news? And now that we have some audience participation going, how many find enjoyment in calling some other group of people a “brood of vipers”?

When I first told Ethel an abbreviated version of where I was going with this text today, her first question was a good one. *“Who was John speaking to here?”* It is easy to get confused here, because in Matthew’s version of this story it is clear that he is referring to Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 3:7). That is *not* the case in Luke’s version though. Luke refers to those being addressed as **“the crowds,” “the tax collectors,” and “the soldiers.”** So he is calling the crowds who came out to see him **“you brood of vipers.”** Sound like a good strategy to you?

Just so know where I hope to land, I am going to suggest that this *is* “good news,” but it might take some mental gymnastics for us to get there.

I am going to depart from the text now in what might seem at first like a wild tangent. If you can bear with me, hopefully you can eventually see how this comes together.

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When I drive in on Sunday mornings, I have gotten into the habit of listening to Krista Tippett’s show *On Being* which comes on shortly after 7 AM. I found last week’s show to be exceptional, and have since listened to it a couple more times on the internet. This episode was unusual in that she was interviewing two guests at the same time. One guest was Avi Klein, a New York City psychotherapist who recently wrote an opinion page article in the New York Times entitled, *“What Men Say About #MeToo in Therapy.”* The other guest was Rebecca Traister. [Anyone here familiar with her work?] She is a self-described feminist journalist, who has written several books and articles. Her most recent book is entitled, *“Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger.”* Although it occurred to me that the title could also be read as *“Good and Mad.”*

In some respects, Rebecca was the star of the show. She spoke a mile a minute, was absolutely brilliant, and full of penetrating insights. Though challenging, there is no part of anything that she said that I would label as off-base. I’m tempted to rattle off some of her insights, but that would take us even farther afield. Knowing what my topic was for this week, I started to see her as a kind of John the Baptist figure. She was bold, no-nonsense, and direct. There was no way you could listen to her without needing to revisit your own life experience and cultural context.

I thought it was a stroke of genius to have her on the show the same time as Avi Klein. Avi was wise, compassionate, and more soft-spoken. He clearly had tremendous respect for Rebecca, yet was the first to acknowledge that, though they share deep concern for the same issues, their approaches were entirely different. While she wrote profound books, and passionately engaged audiences on the speaking circuit, he was in the trenches, away from the limelight, dealing with one psyche at a time.

He spoke about how his practice had changed as a result of the #MeToo Movement. Though disappointed in the lack of public male engagement with this movement, there *is* more private work that he is doing with men looking at “toxic masculinity,” and the associated shame that fuels this behavior. Why did they so misunderstand the women in their lives? Why were they often being accused of hurting them?

I was struck by the way in which these issues needed to be pursued. He referred to a man in his practice who spoke of “that issue” that upset his wife. Now in Avi’s mind he was well aware that reference to “that issue” was actually a reference to an affair that he had had. He was also aware that by referring to it as “that issue,” that the man was not taking ownership of what happened, and was not appreciating the depth of hurt that he had caused. While part of him wanted to point this out with a searing light, he knew that what was most important at this stage was maintaining a relationship of trust, and creating a safe environment to see things afresh. It might take weeks of supportive engagement before this client was ready to see the full truth.

In thinking of this interview with Krista Tippett it struck me that both people had the same goal: more healthy relationships between men and women. Repentance. Likewise, there could be no real victory in the “women’s movement,” without there being a parallel change in the psyches and practice of men. A one-sided victory was not possible. The goal was human flourishing. Or, using the language of John the Baptist, the goal was that they actually “**bear fruit worthy of repentance.**”

So who has the better approach? The super-direct, tell-it-like-it-is approach of Rebecca Traister . . . or the time-consuming, gentle approach of Avi Klein? Actually, I think that question is unfair. *Both* approaches are important and needful in bringing about human flourishing.

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Which brings us back to where we started as we sought to find the good news in this passage. As we “prepare the way for the Lord” this Advent, the teaching emphasis of this passage should not be a prescription for us to be shouting to the world, “**You brood of vipers!**” The teaching emphasis should be in identifying with the crowds who say, “**What then should we do?**”

In fairness, John does not suggest impossible answers to this question. He doesn’t say give away everything you own, and become destitute. He says, “**Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.**” (3:11) Give from your abundance. To the tax collectors he says, “**Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.**” (3:13) To the soldiers he says, “**Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation,**” (3:14) To men who take advantage of women in the workplace we might say, “**Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.**” This is not rocket science.

Think about it though. If everyone with two coats shared with those who had none, not only would the poor benefit because they now had a coat, the rich would benefit because they now

had a lighter relationship to their possessions, and were no longer captive to a deficit mentality. If this exhortation was truly followed, then the closing verse would make sense: **“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”** (3:18) If this actually is taken seriously, it really does sound to me like good news for all. The real “fruit” of John’s call to repentance is displayed in generosity and unselfishness.

To conclude, the intent this morning is not for you to appear at your Christmas party and address everyone with, **“You brood of vipers!”** . . . though it is possible to be good *and mad*. That would be too convenient to shift the attention on to someone else. The greatest benefit you could derive this morning would be to echo the cry of the crowds in saying, **“What then should we do?”**

The temptation is to answer this question in some token way to get us off the hook. However dare to think deeply and personally about this question. If we all responded with true *metanoia* – the Biblical word for seeing things with a changed heart – this would be truly good news, and we would be prepared for the coming of the Christ.

Amen

Luke 3: 7 – 18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming;

I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

