

Peace is offered, will you have room?

Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

I want you to take that feeling, that sense you have right now, because of those voices and hearts (Cantillon's Children's choir had just sung *Away in a Manger*). I want you to remember that because I am about to tell you about John the Baptist and a brood of vipers. I promise we will come back to a peace filled Advent.

Last week, I shared a little bit about how we can prepare ourselves for this season. I also shared that we ministers, for the most part, do not get a choice of which scriptures are presented each Sunday. And so, across Facebook® land this week all the ministers were saying 'brood of vipers; on Peace Advent Sunday? Vipers?' We then began sharing; what are the ways people still call out broods of vipers. We have people for whom 'okay boomer' is something they might say. Others can reply, 'okay millennial'. We all have people we were feeling angry about. "Oh, how I wish I could have been in that room and used the word viper this week."

John was very different in his ministry and approach than Jesus. John was to prepare the way. John was not the Way. John was called to baptize, something Jesus never did. And John was sent to always be in the wilderness and ask people to come to him and to lay down their vileness; to repent; turn their life around. And one of the conversations we often have as Christians is what exactly did John mean by the whole: he is coming with fire and there's going to be a threshing floor, and some are going to be wheat, and some are going to be chaff. Unquenchable fire is never really a Christmassy story and so it's difficult to imagine that John and those words were sent to prepare us for the way of Jesus.

I've been thinking a lot too about what Paul says. Paul sort of sets us up for Advent in his letter to the Romans. He writes, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.' And hope, peace and joy are our themes for the candles as we light them (in our Advent wreath), coming closer and closer to the candle of love and the candle for Christ. What struck me was *believing*. We're not asking the God of hope to fill us with joy and peace as presents that we might open some days, but rather God has given us a gift in believing and in believing we received hope, joy, and peace.

Paul speaks about this *gift* of faith. A belief that God created you, made you, adores you; a belief that God adored us so much that God chose to become incarnate in Jesus. So, instead of God trying

to convince us, 'Oh I know what it's like to be human,' God became human, God became someone who was poor, who was a refugee by his first birthday, whose was part of a people who were under the violent, oppressive reign of a foreign land and empire. He had wonderful friends and he was betrayed by friends; he met amazing people on his journey and then was arrested for being kind and teaching love. God became the least; the one who is invisible, tortured and disappeared. And so, the hope and joy and peace that come with this season is not only in believing that God adores us, not only in peace of carols and candles but also peace of knowing that even when we are surrounded by every sign that violence reigns supreme, our God has been there, has chosen to be there. It is from that place that God gives us forgiveness.

It is easy, much easier for us to guess who are today's Sadducees and Pharisees (who are the current leaders of religion, corporation and empire who are perpetuating violence and injustice). But that leaves us out of John's story. So, I want you to think about the other people who went to see John. They were people who believed God adored them and completely doubted that they were forgiven. They went out to hear someone say, 'everyday you have shot at this, of repenting, of choosing to be your best self.' Yes, there are big "bad guys" in the world and there are special "saint" kind of people in the world. Then there's the rest of all of us. We are those folks who sin and are saints; who can find ourselves greedy at the sight of a sale, and calm and generous at the sight of the hungry.

God does not call us to be perfect, but rather that we continually look at our lives in our communities and do the work of saying: that is good fruit, that is the wheat of our lives. Let us maintain and care for those things. And, we can also take things and say: this destroys, this lessens me or you and that is chaff and we must throw it away. Let us put it back into God's good earth and allow creation to recycle that energy back into good.

May God, the God of hope, joy and peace, bless you this season with moments of truly believing, of discovery that you are adored, that you are forgiven, that you are called to change your life for the better and to welcome all into your midst.

May the God of hope fill us with joy and peace in this great gift: believing that God has come incarnate in a child. A child who loves and needs us. Amen.