

Sermon: What Should We Do?

Year C, Advent 3

[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#); [Isaiah 12:2-6](#); [Philippians 4:4-7](#); [Luke 3:7-18](#)

Offered December 13, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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You brood of vipers! (Luke 3:7). Clearly John the Baptist did not have to get all the pledge forms in to do next year's budget. He goes on "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" There has to be someone in that crowd, some tax collector or soldier or just regular guy who wants to raise his hand, "um, Mr. Baptist, *you* warned us about fleeing from the coming wrath." But there is something so compelling about John, he's a wild man in his animal skins and eating locusts and honey. He's so deep in the Spirit. He's completely committed to what he's doing and yet, in his own words, he's just there to prepare the way for the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Luke 3:16)

Clearly John has charisma. He's calling the crowd a brood of vipers. He's telling them that it doesn't matter who their parents were; it matters what they have done. He's telling them that God can leave them behind and find new followers. He's talking about an axe cutting down the whole tree from the roots, not just a bad branch here or there. This is not a message that anyone ever wants to hear.

And yet instead of flipping the channel or unfriending him on Facebook, the crowd asks, "what should we do?". And they don't ask once. They really get into his answer and ask him three times. And look at his answers. John the Baptist has just told them that they've failed so miserably in their relationship with God that God is ready to cut them off entirely. Cut them off with an axe. Mr. Rhetorical Flourish, Mr. The End of World is Upon Us, how does he answer the question from the crowd, "What should we do?" He says, basically, "If you have more than you need, share what you have." He says, "Do your job." He says, "Don't be mean."

The crowd believes him. They know they have gotten out of right relationship with God and they're asking him how to fix it. As messed up as their relationship with God has gotten, he tells them to do these really small, really mundane actions. What a relief. To get right with God, we need to share what we have, do our jobs and not be mean. That sounds pretty reasonable. In fact, I might be able to do all that and take in the Patriots game tonight at 8:30pm. Maybe even sneak in a trip to the gym. Clearly there is a sermon there about how little we really have to do to remain in right relationship with God and each other. But that is a sermon for another day. We're in the season of Advent, when we are preparing for Christ's return to this world. It might be easier to focus on the answer that John gave and miss what actually happened, miss the part where the preparation may have actually occurred.

How many of you have had a parent or a boss, maybe a coach, say to you, "Just do your best. I can live with the results if you do your best."? It sounded so good. You knew they were telling you they cared about you, maybe even loved you, because in this society that is obsessed with results, they were saying the results didn't matter. And because they loved you, you really did want to do your best. And then you found out how hard doing your best was. "Don't make me do my best. Can't I just get a B?" The trouble with being asked to do your best is that you have to figure out what your best is. That's work, often way more than getting to the weight room twice a week or practicing piano for 30 minutes a day.

The Bible does this all the time. It shares the promise of God's kingdom. It reminds us how reasonable are God's expectations. But first we have to recognize judgment.¹ Again and again, the Bible says, Reflect. Step Back. Remember. Then know how ready God is to meet you in your everyday life. Think for a second. Then share what you have, do your job, don't be mean.

It's so easy to shoot straight past that part of what John is saying. Yes, he's saying to share what you have, do your job and not be mean. But in order to do that, you have to realize you're not sharing what you have, you're not doing your job and you are being mean. You have to recognize yourself as one of a brood of vipers. Not easy to do because what are we spending most of our time doing? Getting what we need, doing our jobs, and dealing with the mean people who are messing up our ability to watch the Patriots. In fact, we can get so caught up in what we're doing that when someone like John the Baptist says, "You brood of vipers!" we get a little psyched. The vipers are really going to get it now. The vipers are going to get tossed out of here and its going to be so much easier to live in right relationship with each other and with God. It's so much easier to see the viper in other people. So much more like work to see it in ourselves. That's indeed what John the Baptist is saying — we're all vipers.

Look around you. Really, look around you. Here's what I see. I see a promise that any veteran will have a trumpeter at their funeral. I see a commitment that any situation that will be improved by a casserole will have a casserole. I see a therapy dog who will visit anyone who needs a dose of unmitigated love. I see a church lawn that will be mowed throughout the summer. I see a fireman wearing his pager on his hip. I see an entire musical group who gave a very busy minister basically a pass on the Sunday before Christmas, giving her the gift of time when she needed it the most. I see people who stood in the Social Hall on last Sunday night after 14 hours in the church and waited to see what the next mountain was that needs to be moved. I see families dealing with challenges with patience and grace and prayer.

So where are the vipers? We're not going to name them here. But in the quiet of my heart, I know where my own vipers lie curled up, just waiting to come out. They emerge as my fears. As Deborah Block put it:

We fear that God is not in our midst and that the enemies of good and God are winning. We fear that our hands are weak and powerless, atrophied by lack of useful work and helpful use, exercised in holding on but needing both physical and spiritual therapy to reach out. We fear insignificance, doubting that we matter in the course of events and dreading that we will be crushed by them. We fear political defeat and natural disaster. We fear shame and reproach, that our faults and foibles will be discovered and render us less than the person we had fooled ourselves and others into thinking we were. We are afraid that we won't have enough, won't be enough.²

All those fears drive us to behaviors that are not doing our best. They are keeping us from sharing what we have, doing our jobs and not being mean. Just in case we run out of things to

¹ Angela Bauer-Levesque, "Third Sunday of Advent, Exegetical Perspective, Zephaniah 3:14-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 55.

² Deborah A. Block, "Third Sunday of Advent, Pastoral Perspective, Zephaniah 3:14-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 52 & 54.

fear, the newscasts will give us more. Some are silly of course, and easily dismissed, but some are not.

So if we're all vipers, if for no other reason than our fears are pushing us around, what do we do about it? In today's reading from Zephaniah, amidst all those promises of joy that were coming, there was a very straight forward declaration, "Do Not Fear." (Zephaniah 3:16). The prophet is not saying that we shouldn't be afraid. The prophet is not saying that we aren't really afraid. The prophet is making a declaration, "Do Not Fear."

The season of Advent comes before Christmas so we can let go of the fear that God will not come again because we are heading toward that day when we celebrate that God came to us the first time, as that baby in Bethlehem. That baby's mother was told not to fear. The shepherds who came to see him the night he was born were told not to fear. And when the rock was rolled back and the tomb was found empty, Mary Magdalene was told not to fear, "he is not here, for he has been raised" (Matthew 28:5-6).

So what should we, the brood of vipers, do? Share what we have, do our jobs, don't be mean. Indeed, Do Not Fear.