

“Vipers, Fear, and the True Meaning of Christmas”

A sermon on Luke 3:7-18 and Philippians 4:4-7

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Most of you know that I preach just once a month here at Covenant, and I confess that sometimes I feel like I draw the short stick on Scripture passages. That’s actually not really fair to Pastor Ann, who gets more than her fair share of difficult Scripture, but this month when I looked at the Gospel lesson for today I was pretty determined not to preach on it.

The problem is, it just doesn’t feel *Christmasy*. This time of year, I want to find some escape from the chaos of daily life. At church, I want to hear about angels, and a little baby wrapped in blankets, and shepherds, and a quiet, starry night.

Doesn’t that sound good?

Unfortunately, that is not what the God has in store for us today in the Gospel of Luke. Today’s story features John the Baptist. John is kind of an intimidating figure. He’s more than a little rough around the edges – he is a wild man; a larger-than-life prophet of doom. He dresses in camel hair and eats locusts and honey. And yet, he clearly has a following, because people are flocking to him to be baptized.

Luke describes “crowds” of people coming to John. They want to be baptized.

[Imagine what it would be like if crowds of people showed up at Covenant today wanting to be baptized! We would probably jump up and down and say *come on in!*] But John doesn’t welcome them no-questions-asked. In fact, the first thing he says to them is, “You children of snakes!” (or, as other translations have it, *you brood of*

vipers!). Basically what John is saying is, “Oh, I get it...you hear that Judgement Day is coming so you decided you better come on over and cover yourselves by getting baptized.

Well, it’s not enough to just say that you’re children of Abraham and so you deserve it. You’ve got to change your hearts and lives!”

John tells them they’ve got to live justly – share your clothes and food. Stop cheating others. Be satisfied with what you have.

Now how on earth is this a story for Christmas?

John is all about preparing the way for Jesus. And this time of year, Advent, is about the same thing. As Pastor Ann said last week, this is a time of getting our houses in order – a time of preparing to meet Jesus with a clear conscience.

Just as John tells the crowds “Don’t even think about saying, ‘Well I’m a Jew,’” John is telling us, don’t think that just because you *call* yourself a Christian and you have your tree up and your nativity scene on your mantel that that makes you ready for Jesus.

No, you need to get your own house in order. You need to produce “good fruit.”

Last week, Pastor Ann talked about looking within ourselves as part of Advent.

This week, I want to talk about looking at ourselves as a community. I want us to think about how what we, as individuals, do affects who we are as a society.

This past week, I have seen and heard – and I’m sure many of you have, too – alarming rhetoric of hate. Disturbing suggestions that we, as a nation, take action against Muslims: most specifically, that we bar Muslims from entering the United States. It has even been implied that we could require Muslims in America to carry faith-based identity cards, or subject them to warrantless searches.

The rhetoric about Muslims has gotten so pervasive that it’s everywhere – on every channel, every Facebook feed, every news page.

Now, imagine what this kind of talk means for Muslim-Americans. For people who were born here, who have lived their whole lives here, working – as teachers and physicians and public servants and community builders, even serving in our armed forces. Neighbors, friends, countrymen are being stereotyped and indiscriminately reviled because of the religion they profess.

How would you feel if you were a Muslim-American? Would you let your children walk to school alone? Would you feel safe riding public transportation? Would you try to figure out what emergency supplies you need to have at hand in case you need to leave your home quickly? Even as the “Christian” world around you settles in for a season of peace and joy, would you batten down the hatches, waiting for bigoted rhetoric to turn into all-out riots? It’s happening. Just last week, The Islamic Center

cancelled a peace rally because they didn't feel safe. That's right: in the season of Christmas, *fear* cancelled *peace*.

I feel like I can hear John the Baptist saying *to us*: "You brood of vipers!" You children of snakes! Who told you to talk about Jesus, to celebrate Christmas, when you are allowing this type of hatred in your society?

What makes you think that you are better than anyone else, just because you personally are not the one spewing hate?

You know, about 80 years ago, as the Nazis started to move against the Jews in Germany, many Christians remained silent. They did nothing. Meanwhile, some religious leaders and politicians argued that Jews should not be allowed into the United States during that period. Around that same time, many religious leaders did nothing as the U.S. government rounded up law-abiding Japanese-Americans and sent them to internment camps. The rhetoric we are hearing today is as bad as what we heard in the time of Hitler.

We can't stand for it.

It's not Christian.

In our Luke passage today, the crowds ask John the Baptist, "What then should we do?" Today, when we ask the same question, the answer is also the same. We must produce good fruit. We have to speak out. We have to defend – we have to LOVE – our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Our enemy is not Muslims.

Our enemy is fear.

In the passage from the letter to the Philippians that we read today, the apostle Paul tells us, "Don't be anxious about anything....Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people!" Paul is talking to *us*!

We are called to relinquish our fears. We are called to give our cares to God so that we are free to love without restraint.

1 John 4:18 tells us that *perfect love drives out fear*. Our perfect love – as Christians – can drive out this fear that is overtaking our nation.

And this – finally! – is where Christmas comes in.

Christmas is about God's **perfect love**. Christmas is about how God loved us humans *so much* that God chose to become one of us. God chose to be one of us – to be *human* – in all our frailty. God didn't choose to come in a blaze of glory, as a mighty king in a crown of gold and robes of silk, bringing a sword and powerful allies. No, God chose to come in the middle of the night as a tiny baby, born to a poor, unwed mother, without even a proper place to lay his head. (If you were God, is that how *you* would choose to come into this world?)

Christmas is a time when we celebrate the incarnation of God on earth through Jesus' birth. It's a time when we recognize the immense love that it took for God to give us this gift.

And it's a time when we *reflect back* to the world that perfect love.

So this season we ask, as the crowds asked John the Baptist, "*What then should we do?*"

I believe the answer for today is to cast out fear and be Christ in the world. It may seem strange that the most Christmas-y thing we can do is be in solidarity with people who don't even believe in Jesus as Savior. But there it is.

And there are a lot of things we can do:

- If you see a Muslim or someone who might be identified as Muslim being harassed, stop, say something, call for help.
- If you ride public transportation, sit next to the hijabi woman and say *asalam 'alaykum* (That means 'peace to you.'). Or just say, "peace."
- If you have a Muslim work colleague, check in. Tell them that the news is horrifying and you want them to know you're there for them.
- If you have neighbors who are Muslim, keep an eye out for them. If you're walking your kids home from the bus stop, invite their kids to walk with you.
- Talk to your kids about what they can do when they see bullying or hear hate speech at school.
- Call out hate speech when you hear it—if it incites hatred or violence against a specified group, call it out: in your living room, at work, with friends, in public.
- Engage the Muslims in your life. Make sure you really feel comfortable standing for and with your Muslim friends, neighbors, coworkers.

Sometimes, it's not easy to be a Christian. Sometimes, it means facing our fears. It means going outside our own comfort zones. John the Baptist acknowledges that.

But the reason for doing this – for changing our hearts and lives – is so worth it.

Because, as John says, “The one who is more powerful than me is coming.”

Jesus is coming. In just 11 days we will gather around and sing *Silent Night*, anticipating the coming of God among us.

John says that the one who is coming after him, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, will clean out the granary and burn the wheat husks with a fire that can't be put out. That fire is not the fire of hell – that fire is the all-consuming, purifying fire of unquenchable *love*.

This Christmas, let *your* love burn with an intensity that scorches bigotry and fear.

Let everyone know that *love* is the Good News of Jesus Christ this Christmas.