

Luke 3:7–18 (The Message)

When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your *life* that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”

The crowd asked him, “Then what are we supposed to do?”

“If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.”

Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He told them, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.”

Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He told them, “No shakedowns, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”

The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?”

But John intervened: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

There was a lot more of this—words that gave strength to the people, words that put heart in them. The Message!

## Fair Warning

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: December 6, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 3:7–18

I remember being confused when I read William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner's stream of consciousness writing style is always difficult. In addition, the novel was narrated from the point of view of four different perspectives. But most confusing to me was that the chronology was erratic. Part 1 happened on April 7, 1928; Part 2 on June 2, 1910; Part 3 on April 6, 1928; and Part 4 on April 8, 1924. I couldn't keep track of who did what or who knew what when. I remember being tempted to cut the book up and rearrange the sections.

Sometimes reading the Gospels can feel a little bit like reading Faulkner. We read stories, like this morning's story about John the Baptist. John baptized say in the 30s of the First Century. But Luke is writing for the church at the end of the First Century. And some of the things John predicts have already happened. John warned that God's judgment would come if the people didn't change, and sure enough Rome stormed Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and sent the people scattering in 70. Not only that, but Luke is writing to the church well after the fall of Jerusalem, and he now apparently wants to use John's warning to the Jews to warn the Christians that they, too, must not sit on their laurels. Like Faulkner's, Luke's chronology is all over the place. And like Faulkner, Luke has his reasons. Even by the end of the First Century, it seems, some Christians thought being Christian was enough. But Luke wants them to understand that being a Christian is no better than being a child of Abraham. Christians, as John says of children of Abraham, are a dime a dozen. It's not enough to be a Christian. What counts is your life, Luke wants to say.

In this sense, then, Luke sees John as very much in tune with Jesus. While John claims that Jesus is the main character in the story, not himself, it's pretty clear that John and Jesus are of the same pedigree. Indeed, it is from Luke that we learn that John and Jesus are blood relatives. John's teachings are also consistent with those of Jesus, of the same family, as it were.

We read that the word of the Lord came to John and he began baptizing people in the Jordan River with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke tells us that crowds came out to hear and be baptized by John. John's message struck a nerve. People came to be baptized and have their sins forgiven. But John doesn't mince his words. John said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The people came to John because they knew their lives were off-kilter somehow. And they were attracted to the idea that a little dunk in the river would fix them up. But John was baptizing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, not just forgiveness but a baptism of repentance. You must purify your life, he said, not just not just cleanse your body with a ritual. The waters of baptism alone will not save you. Neither will the fact that you are a member of the chosen people. "What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming?" says John

And John left no doubt about what he meant. In words that sound much like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, John says,

"If you have two coats, give one away," he said. "Do the same with your food."

Tax men: "No more extortion—collect only what is required by law."

Soldiers: “No shakedowns, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”

John called them a brood of snakes because he knew they were looking for a quick fix. Most of them were unprepared to make such changes in their lives. Indeed, by the time Luke tells this story Jesus has been crucified and Jerusalem has fallen. Both were evidence of the human failure to repent that John was worried about. And while all the people played a part in the failures, John is clearly offers social critique. He realized that the ones most guilty and least likely to change were those with wealth and power, those with a closet full of coats, and the tax collectors and the soldiers.

As we prepare for Jesus’ birth in this season, we find these same indictments prominent in Luke’s narration of the story. When Mary, expectant with child, visits Elizabeth, Mary sings her famous song, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

She sings, “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Luke gives us a consistent and forceful account. First John the Baptist, then Mary and then Jesus are clear about what is required and what the realm of God is to look like. They are clear that those who will be in that realm will be transformed. And they are clear that those who refuse to see will be put out with the trash. It was fair warning.

Luke writes of John preaching in the early First Century. He means to find implications of John’s message in the fall of Jerusalem. And Luke means to warn the Christians of his time. And surely we are meant to read this text as a warning our own time. I think you would agree that John would look out at our world and still find a brood of snakes which doesn’t really want to change, which expects, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words, cheap grace easy forgiveness.

Bank CEOs earn tens of millions of dollars a year while their decisions and greed ruined uncounted thousands of homeowners and sent the economy into a tailspin in 2008. National Football League Commissioner Roger Goodell makes 44 million dollars a year for doing God only knows what. Politicians screech constantly about the preciousness of human life as they lobby against abortion, but at the same time they call programs to help women and children or people on the streets despicable socialism. Somehow the right to life to doesn’t necessarily mean to have a place to live and enough to eat. They’re all about families, except for certain kinds of families; they’re for families as long as they’re economically independent, as long as they headed by a man and a woman, and as long as they agree we live in a Christian nation. They see refugees and other potential immigrants, who are precious living people with precious lives John the Baptist would remind them, they see refugees and other potential immigrants as a threat to America’s safety and especially to America’s wealth, and they reject them. They favor corporate welfare but not human welfare. They love capitalism so much that they want corporations to have political rights. They turn a blind eye to corporate devastation of God’s green earth. And the great majority of them call themselves followers of Jesus. They call themselves Christians. And John would say, “Christians are a dime a dozen. God can make Christians from stones. What counts is your life.”

What counts is your life. But what does that mean? John the Baptist has, of course, given us a good start: be generous and fair, he says. But as Christians we can perhaps give the meaning a little more flesh, to make a bad pun.

Sara Miles has written a remarkable book called *Take This Bread*. Miles was a convinced and adamant atheist, but during a confusing and painful time in her life, she one day wandered into a church service and took communion. Quite suddenly she experienced an unexpected

conversion. She was changed. In a flash the Christian story made sense to her. Miles was, among other things, a cook. As a cook she knew that we are quite literally what we eat. She also understood that while we are in utero we quite literally feed on the body and blood of our mother, and of course ever afterwards our parents are and remain a part of who we are right down to the flesh and bone. Suddenly it clicked for her. Take, eat, this is my body. Take drink, this is my blood. In a symbolic act we quite literally, even if mysteriously, are fed by Jesus, we are fed of Jesus. In partaking of him he becomes a part of us in the same way that we are a part of our mothers, and that Jesus was part of God. We become that which feeds us. For Miles the logical next step was to use her chef's training. She, now part of the body of Christ herself, took up his ministry by feeding others. As she says it, "I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I'd first received the body of Christ. I organized new pantries all over my city to provide hundreds and hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week." It is much like the sandwiches we make for the Outdoor Church, which we bless here, which become the body of Christ, and which then go out to feed men, women and children on the street.

Miles has understood the meaning of communion beautifully and literally. Her theological insight goes much deeper, of course. Christians who simply call themselves Christians but do not act out the reality that they are made a part of Christ's body are a dime a dozen. As we move into our communion service here in this season of Advent we are called to a more nourishing and authentic faith. As we break bread and share the cup we are reminded that it is God who feeds us and gives us drink. We are reminded that this bread and wine will change us, if we let them; they will change us in the most basic of ways. This bread and wine will become part of our cells and part of our living. It can change a brood of vipers into people whose lives are green and blossoming. It can make our lives green and blossoming." Amen.