

Sunday, December 6, 2015 – Advent 2  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 3:2b-14

### **You Brood of Vipers**

“You brood of vipers!” (I wanted to say that again, from the pulpit.) What a pronouncement from John the Baptist, that eccentric New Testament prophet, that wilderness preacher with a dire warning: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree.” What a thing to say to a crowd of people who have left the relentless grind, the casual miseries of their day to day lives with the hope they’ll hear good preaching, gospel, good news. What a thing to say to people who are looking, longing for a word of new life. What a thing to say to people about to join our church. Thank you, John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is always in the gospel for the second Sunday in Advent, the four weeks in which we prepare for the birth of Jesus the Christ. Like last week, in which our gospel reading occurred well after the birth of Jesus, so also this week we have a story that takes place when Jesus is an adult. In Luke’s gospel narrative it’s only chapter three, but we’re still well after the story of Jesus’ birth, years after. We’ll continue to do this jumping back and forth in time in the weeks to come, in two weeks we’ll hear about the birth of John the Baptist. Today, though, he’s all grown up, and what a character. John the Baptist is a cousin to Jesus, just a few months older. John the Baptist arrives a little earlier than Jesus, and his role is to get people ready for Jesus, to prepare the way, which is what Advent is all about: preparing, getting ready for Jesus’ coming. John the Baptist gets us ready, not by buying presents, or hanging decorations, or going to parties—all those holiday things so many people do, things I like to do, what good things they can be to do—but they’re not what you find John the Baptist doing. He wasn’t baking Christmas cookies.

John the Baptist can seem a strange, even off-putting. In addition to hanging out in the wilderness, he wears a camel hair cloak, and eats a diet of locusts. Though he was an out-doorsy guy, I doubt he smelled fresh and piney as a Christmas tree. Possibly more off-putting than his breath are his words, his announcement, his pronouncement about the moral condition of those who listen: “You brood of vipers!” That’s how the John the Baptist gets us ready, by bluntly asserting that how we live, what we do, who we are, is as tangled and dangerous as a twisting, hissing mass of venomous snakes. In other words, we’re caught up in a world of wrong, all of us, we’re all implicated, through and through. To use the theological term for it, we sin. Just what kind of good news, just how hopeful, is this?

Last year, I watched the television series True Detective (Season one –I hear season two is not as good.) True Detective had crowds of admirers, was the darling of critics, and I could see why: it had a complicated narrative, it kept jumping back and forth in time. Its main characters, the two detectives, had wild streaks. They would pursue leads that took them out in the wilderness, and they could be strange, off-putting. One was particularly eccentric: Rust. Rust had a prophetic gleam to his eye and was prone to making dire pronouncements. Rust was a particularly good interrogator. He could get anyone, and everyone, to confess. At one point, another character asked him how he did this, what made him so good at getting people to admit their crime. Rust’s explanation was this: “Look—everybody knows there’s something wrong with them. They just don’t know what it is. Everybody wants confession. The guilty especially, and everybody’s guilty.”

I heard that speech and I thought, “I hadn’t realized Rust was a Lutheran.” Actually, I thought, “That’s a pretty good description of sin—of original sin.” Original sin is a theological concept held by, but not exclusive to, Lutheran Christians. Original sin is an old concept, and to modern ears it can sound strange, off-putting, even offensive. Some say it should be a relic of the past and by all means don’t preach it, don’t talk about it in the pulpit—it will drive people away in crowds. It didn’t seem to do that for fans of True Detective.

Rust is on to something, and it’s not original to him. Like the crowds who came to hear John the Baptist, we know there’s something wrong. Sometimes we don’t know what it is, don’t know why we feel it. Even this time of the year, we can feel it in spite of the holiday cheer, or amidst it, or because of it. Advent can be hard, because we know there’s something wrong. There’s something wrong with the world in which we live, there’s something wrong with us. And it’s not just one thing, it’s lots of things. So many things it’s hard to know where to start. Sometimes our lives feel like such a tangled, poisonous mess, the only thing we are sure of is the wrath to come. I feel that way when I think about the state of our environment, our changing climate. I feel that way when I think of the state of our state budget, our city leadership. I’ve felt that terrible, tangled mess about dreaded projects, and difficult relationships. Maybe original sin is off-putting, but it’s accurate. What is wrong is pervasive, and collective, and personal. “You brood of vipers...” Everybody knows it, and everybody’s guilty. Literary critic Terry Eagleton writes that to affirm original sin is to “take soberly realistic account of the tenacity of human egoism, the persistence of violence and self-delusion, the arrogance of power, the compulsive recurrence of conflict, the fragility of virtue, and the eternal dissatisfaction of desire.”

And yet, for Eagleton, this is hopeful, it is hopeful to take this sober account. It is hopeful to know that something is wrong, because to do so is to prepare for, get ready, be able to receive something else. Eagleton says that original sin means—actually this is the introduction to his dire description—Eagleton says original sin means that humans have “a capacity for redemption that can never be suppressed, but only if they repent—which is to say, only if they take soberly realistic account.” Let me say that first part again, from the pulpit, we have: “a capacity for redemption that can never be suppressed.” Awareness of the pervasiveness of sin leads Christians to profound appreciation of hope. To know something is wrong, is to know there is something more.

John the Baptist knew this, he knew what good news this was, that we are and can and must be ready for something greater yet to come. Thank you John the Baptist. Here’s how we get ready: by seeing we must change, and asking how. Each and every one of us can do this, like the crowds did, they asked John the Baptist, “What then shall we do?” and he answered. His pronouncement about collective guilt is followed by concrete opportunities for individual action. Here’s a place to start, John the Baptist says “You have two coats? Then you have one you can give away; some have none.” You work for the government? Do your job with justice. You are an officer? Don’t threaten, don’t lie. Everybody can ready, everyone and anyone, tax collectors, soldiers, pastors, parishioners. The gospel says that we all have this capacity for redemption, each and every one of us, and redemption is coming, even now.