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The Message: Brood of Vipers or Bands of Cloth?

My kids were very young when they started to go to the opera with me. My oldest was only three when she decided she wanted to go. Each year, there was at least one opera that just didn't seem age appropriate. Like Salome, directed by Atom Egoyan, so they didn't see the beheading of John the Baptist among other things. That summer at ages 8 and 5, they went to the Canadian Opera Company's Opera Camp at their rehearsal facility at the old Dalton Fruit factory on Eastern Avenue. In the entrance, there was a large glass case, with, you guessed it, the head of John the Baptist in all its realistic gore.

John the Baptist has a habit of popping up where he isn't wanted: in the suggested readings for three of the four weeks of Advent some years. And that was exactly how Herod felt about him back when he was drawing crowds in the desert and crying out for people to repent to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Herod did not want a prologue to a main event he couldn't control: he was supposed to be the main event!

But maybe it is theologically therapeutic for us to travel into the wilderness and listen to John. Sanity for us is to allow John to speak to us in the wilderness of our contemporary world. Let his challenge to repentance confront our present situation. Let the positive note outweigh the negative elements. Let the future he looked forward to entice us. Let the Messiah he longed for enthral us.

John quotes scripture from the past to identify the one to come as a fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah, Micah and Exodus.

He prepares us to listen to Jesus as one with authority. He tells us we have a task as we wait: to look to ourselves, to examine ourselves, to reflect on our morality. to prepare ourselves to be part of the action.

To sum up John's teachings: 'Treat others fairly and worship God.'

And that was enough for Herod to have him killed: to prevent mischief, a coming rebellion. Herod's actions were summed up as, 'If I don't kill him now I may regret it later.'

In 1989, my husband's hometown of San Francisco experienced a serious earthquake. We watched with fear as freeways collapsed that his mother drove daily. We watched as the huge fire in the Marina area burned. We saw the fire fighters fighting the fires. The scene I remember the most, was a group of people standing around watching. All of a sudden a police officer yelled: "What are you people doing just standing there?! You must get prepared immediately. Go home and fill your bathtubs up with water. Be prepared to live without city services for 72 hours. The sun will set in another hour and your time is running out! Go get prepared!"

John was like that officer who knew the gawkers needed to get prepared! People needed John's message. Why are you just standing there. You need to prepare the way. Making the path straight. Go and get ready.

The story of John the Baptist continues from our reading:

"John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

Imagine receiving a lovely Christmas card as I did from a friend in my clergy Bible study group one year: Wishing you the joys of the season – only to open it and read "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?!"

That's John the Baptist's version of a Christmas card.

He suggests that God can raise up children of Abraham out of **stones** that are better than the people hearing John's words.

When they react with anxious questions, he tells them, "Share your stuff; don't overcharge; and for Pete's sake, don't extort people!"

When they wonder whether John is being so tough because he's the Messiah, he interrupts them: "Don't think I'm the Messiah. You haven't heard anything yet. I might baptize you with water; he's going to use spirit and fire! He's armed with a pitchfork and he's tossing you mugs into an endless fire!

And "So," Luke says, "with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

I can't help but think that Luke is writing this down with a certain amount of irony. This is good news?

Why the warning? Like the police officer who wanted the people to be safe, John cared about the people.

Why John the Baptist in the midst of this season? Because God cares enough to want from us the very best. Repentance is not just changing our minds, or feeling sorry for something that we have done. Repentance means to turn around and go in another direction. What John the Baptist wanted his audience to hear was: Turn your life toward this one called Messiah. This is not negative or defeatist. Rather, it breaks the chains of oppression and death that hold us back.

When we notice the warning and truly turn our lives around with Christ's help, we cease to be the 'brood of vipers' John was speaking to. Instead we become the 'bands of cloth' that wrapped the baby Jesus. We swaddle Jesus with our loving actions; we make room for Jesus in our hearts – but more so, in the world.

And so, here we are in Advent, checking ourselves out, readjusting our lives so that we are walking a sure path toward Jesus, repenting our way to a Merry Christmas. And it IS good news to have this yearly reminder of John's. To mold our lives to be the bands of cloth that protect who Jesus is for us today.