

John the Baptist is Calling Us Names

Matthew 3:1-12

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Every year about this time, John the Baptist shows up. He dresses oddly. Camel's hair and leather figure into his wardrobe. He eats one of those new-fangled diets: locusts and wild honey. He appears *not* to be the nice, religious boy you want your daughter to meet at the office Christmas party.

John's message is stark, simply, troubling, and politically incorrect. Every year, he calls us names:

You—YOU—are a brood of vipers. REPENT!

Repent. Why? Because the Kingdom of heaven has come near. Why? Because Jesus is coming. The kingdom of heaven is getting very close. Get ready so you can welcome it, celebrate it, claim it, proclaim it.

And how do we get ready? We repent.

"To repent" means, simply, to turn from sin towards God. To repent means to turn from the ways that break us to the ways that make us whole, and that mean's turning towards the will and ways of God.

The people seem attentive. They allow him to baptize them. Baptism represents this moment of turning away from my way, my will, my plan to God's way, God's will, God's plan. I don't live for myself anymore. I'm doing my best to live for God.

Then the Pharisees and Sadducees show up and John calls them a "brood of vipers." That word "brood" or "generation" appears nine times in the New Testament. When John the Baptist uses it, he's telling the religious leaders of the day that you and your generation are walking down the road to ruin. Your stinky ways are bearing stinky fruit.

Why is John so upset with Pharisees and Sadducees? It's probably simply because they are the people in the scene who wield the most power. And the system which they support is the system Jesus has come to challenge. Jesus would later say of these leaders, "do what they say, but don't do what they do."

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Welcome to Advent.

You can't read about Jesus' early life and ministry without reading about John the Baptist. And John the Baptist has one of the single most challenging messages for us during a season when we'd rather drink egg nog and sing songs about Jesus in a manger. John's message is to "repent."

To repent means to examine oneself, and to change by turning more and more away from your own desires, impulses, plans, and *sin*, and to turn, more and more, to God's way.

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I've had people my whole ministry ask why we say a prayer of confession every week in worship. They say things like, "I'm not guilty of those things about which we pray."

Before one repents of sin, one needs first to come to the realization that one is broken and bent by sin in the first place. And some of us think we are not. *I don't need to repent. My way is the right way; nothing needs to change. Other people might need to turn to God, but not me. I'm already on exactly the right path. I'm already perfect.* People who think this way—bless their hearts—not only don't take scripture seriously, but don't take themselves seriously.

Notice that John the Baptist doesn't say that "Some of you need to repent." Rather, he appears to direct his preaching to everybody, particularly to people who represent the status quo and to people who have lots of power. The Sadducees, the Pharisees, and, possibly, the Presbyterians. John tells everybody, repent.

When I examine myself, I have to ask myself:

- Am I guilty of putting myself in front of you, O God?
- Am I guilty of putting you off, O God?
- Am I guilty of neglecting my neighbor? Am I guilty of not asking who is my neighbor? How do I gerrymander my neighborhood to include certain people and to exclude certain others?
- Have I made myself, my point of view, my needs, my family, my desires the center of my life? Surely not, because if that were the case, I'd be guilty of idolatry, and isn't that one of the Ten Commandments?
- In what ways do my race and my ethnic heritage influence me? Have "my people" treated other people well? Have I played the victim? Have I been the oppressor? (This is sticky stuff.)
- Am I guilty of not thinking hard enough about the bigger picture?
- Am I guilty of putting down people who are different than me? Their culture is okay, but mine is better. Their way of thinking, of doing, of believing isn't as good as my ways.
- Am I guilty of believing simplistic solutions will solve complex problems?
- Am I guilty of believing that while I'm part of the answer, I'm not part of the problem?
- Am I guilty of believing I'm innocent, I'm clean, I'm righteous?

John the Baptism isn't speaking to a few people in that crowd, he's talking to everybody. Then—and now.

The Kingdom of God is getting close. Jesus is coming. He's got a cool way of rethinking the whole cosmos. Jesus has a way of drawing the teachings of our fathers and mothers into a beautiful focus. Jesus will help us live together more authentically. Jesus will tell us that we've been leaving the poor out, and the blind, and the sick, and those without healthcare, and those long-silenced. Jesus is going to challenge us about our money, about loving our neighbor, about doing justice, about what true worship is.

Get ready, John says. Getting your lives together matters. Being open to the coming work of Jesus matters. As ones who will great and follow Jesus, our behavior matters.

David Bartlett tells the story about a mother and father heading to the preschool on the last day before the Christmas holiday to pick up their son. The children have been working on gifts for the parents. Their child with his gift-wrapped present runs down the hall to his parents, but trips, and the present crashes to the floor, its ceramic contents shattering.

The boy begins immediately to wail and cry, and the father rushes over and says, "It's okay, son. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all."

"But the child's mother, somewhat wiser in such situations, swept the boy into her arms and said, "Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal." And she wept with her son (p. 46, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 1).

John is saying, our lives matter. Our conduct matters. Walking the walk matters. God's love for us matters. And God's call to us to love others matters. So, pay attention to your lives and straighten up the crooked places.

Jesus is coming. Heaven is near.

Repent.