

2 Advent A December 8, 2019
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Why Did it Have to Be Snakes?
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

“Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?”

Perhaps some of you recognize one of the well-known quotes from the movie *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of Lost Ark*. The hero, Indiana Jones himself, said those words after opening up a pit where the lost Ark of the Covenant was hidden and discovered the Ark was protected by hundreds if not thousands of dangerously venomous snakes. Despite his fear of snakes, even harmless ones, Indiana Jones realized if he was going to protect the Ark from Nazis and rescue the damsel, he was going to have to face his fear and figure out how to deal with all those dangerous snakes.

Such adventure might be all part of a day’s work for heroes like Indiana Jones, but his quote about snakes could just as easily apply to our Scripture readings this morning, where we also find a fair number of venomous snakes.

We first heard about those snakes in our reading from Isaiah where amidst lovely imagery of wolves living with lambs, leopards and goats hanging out together, and cows and bears eating the grass of the field together, Isaiah also mentioned infants playing by the door of an asp’s den and toddlers playfully putting their hands into the den of an adder. Both adders and asps are poisonous snakes, whose bites are not only painful, they can also be deadly if not medically treated. Our reading from Isaiah is called often “the Peaceable Kingdom” and often appears in the season of Advent as it is considered prophecy that describes what the world will be like when the Messiah comes and is meant to help us prepare for the Kingdom that is coming that will somehow make predators and their prey equals and remove the poison from venomous snakes so that even children can play near them without fear of pain or death.

These lovely words of Isaiah are often visually depicted as tranquil scenes, but perhaps there is more to those words than literal wolves, lambs, adders and asps. Perhaps Isaiah was using such images to invoke something deeper in us human beings, to challenge us to consider what it would take for an animal that eats another to change drastically what they eat and how they hunt in order to live together and then reflect on how that change might apply to our own lives.

That may be what John the Baptist was doing in our Gospel reading this morning when he called the religious leaders who showed up at the Jordon River where he was baptizing people “a brood of vipers”. Vipers are another kind of venomous snake whose bite is poisonous to humans. In these days when anger seems to be the only

language so many people use, perhaps out of fear that any other form of communication will be ignored or not taken seriously, it is easy to dismiss John the Baptist's words as those of anger or snark or cynicism directed against the religious leaders in order to set them up as the bad guys. Unfortunately, dismissing John the Baptist's words as just "words of anger" can also be a way of distancing ourselves from his message of repentance and the importance those words have for all of us, especially during this season of Advent.

John the Baptist is the central Biblical figure for Advent. Not Mary. Not Jesus. Not Joseph. John the Baptist in his ugly clothing and his challenging words that may have been more closely related to Isaiah's Peaceable Kingdom than they are to anger. Like Isaiah, John the Baptist was a prophet, someone whose role is to call people to turn away from sin and turn toward God. John the Baptist is remarkable because in his time there hadn't been a man or woman who had been called to that role in a very long time, and people were hungry for words of hope, words that reminded them there is another way to live, another way to be, that people don't have to hurt each other, that anger doesn't have to be the only language people speak, and that hope is centered around the possibility that people, that any person, can change for the better.

Prophets were not just people who pointed out sin, the poison doing so much harm in the lives of people and in the world. Prophets also reminded people they are capable of change, of following a different path, and in that change, there is hope for a better life; one centered on God not on selfish desires.

That message of hope is most likely the reason for John the Baptist's popularity, why so many people came to him to be washed clean of their sin, in order to start the process of change, the process the church calls repentance, the process of turning toward God. And this is why John the Baptist is our central Biblical figure during Advent, to give us the same reminder that such change is not only possible, it is what God is calling us to do, because that is how we are to prepare for the arrival of Jesus.

However, John the Baptist doesn't sugar coat his message, or say it will be a simple, easy process. That is in part because John the Baptist also tells us that the darkness or poison of sin isn't just something that happens around us and to us, it is something that also can be residing inside of us, and we can be contributors to the darkness or poison of sin in the world. In order for us to change, to repent, we first need to name those sins, so we can be absolved and work on leaving them behind so they cannot raise their ugly, poisonous heads and harm us and others.

This is the stuff of bearing the fruits worthy of repentance we heard John the Baptist talk about in today's Gospel and while it might sound like unsavory work, it is work that people are capable of doing, and when they do it, they discover how it really

does bring about the peace of Christ. One person who shared her experience of this is the Rt. Rev. Audrey Cady Scanlan, Bishop of Central Pennsylvania who in today's reflection in our Advent Devotional from Living Compass *Practicing Peace with all our Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength* wrote about the first time she did a personal confession. Her experience was indeed gut wrenching; she wrote she went over every sin in her life, couldn't sleep or eat, and sobbed her way through her confession, and when the person who listened to her confession pronounced her sins were put away, she wrote she felt that very same peace Isaiah described in today's first lesson. However, that peace did not come to her because the world around her had changed. She found the peace of Christ because she had changed, she had done the excruciating work of naming her sins, the little and big poisons in her, with every intention of putting them behind her.

This is the deep work John the Baptist is calling us all to do during these days in Advent as we prepare for Jesus to come again. The prophet gives us this challenge in order to help us rid ourselves of those things in us that can take up room in our hearts, minds, and souls that crowd out the love of God we experience in Jesus and keep us centered on ourselves. This task can be frightening, it is not easy to explore such aspects of ourselves, those wounds that we won't allow to heal, the forgiveness we withhold, the anger we insist on savoring, or the fears or anxiety that we trust more than God. But this is where the Good News of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection comes in.

As it says in a rather lovely hymn about Jesus, "In him there is no darkness at all, the day and night are both alike." Which means when we take up John the Baptist's call to face the darkness in the world and in us, we aren't doing so alone. We have Jesus, who is God with Us, who is already there in the dark waiting for us, for Jesus showed us in his life, death, and resurrection there isn't anyplace the Love of God is afraid to go, in the world and in our hearts. And the more we focus on Christ, the more we'll find ourselves able to name and face those poisonous fears and sins and the more we name them, the more their power will diminish, and we'll find we have more room in our hearts for love that is Christ-centered.

This won't happen quickly, it takes time, which is okay because its important work, the work of bearing fruit worthy of repentance. Maybe the Peaceable Kingdom isn't something that will magically happen around us. Perhaps it really is something that will slowly and quietly enter the world through us, when we practice loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, making room for Christ to shine within us, and then let that light shine through us into the world.