

Sons of Snakes

Matthew 3: 1-12

I don't like snakes. I avoid them at all costs and even got an uneasy feeling just writing this sermon title. In Matthew's Gospel, when John the Baptist saw a group of religious leaders coming to see him, he called them snakes: "You brood of vipers!" You sons of snakes! "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

It was hard to fool John the Baptist. He knew who those religious leaders were. He knew what they stood for and how they lived their lives. Without question, he let them know, "you had better change your ways if you want me to baptize you. John the Baptist is one of the most curious figures in the gospels. One account claims he was a distant cousin to Jesus. His mother was named Elizabeth His father was a priest named Zechariah. The gospels suggest that John might have been the second coming of Elijah the prophet. His message was simple: "Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand." It's here! Run for your lives! Run to the Jordan River and get baptized! Change your lives now!

We live in an age of individual repentance. How many of you have heard the invitation to turn from your sin, repent, receive the Spirit, and be saved? That's not what John was talking about. It was not like today when a political figure, a television evangelist, or a celebrity can cry, confess their sin, seek forgiveness, and expect everything to be okay. John the Baptist was not seeking individual repentance.

Pharisees and Sadducees represented the Law and the Temple and, thus, the whole nation of Judah. Actually, they were just Judea by this time, a Roman province. But John was calling them all to a corporate or group repentance – to change their tune. The challenge was to give up being God's chosen people Israel as they had been understanding and doing it. The repentance for which John was calling would mean a whole new self understanding for the people and their leaders.

What is the connection to our present day? What would John's challenge be for the Christian Church and specifically Crossroads Church? It would be to call our nation to group repentance. That challenge is to call our nation and its leaders to reconsider how we are being the United States of America. To accept such a challenge would mean to do much more than vote or even get involved in the political process itself, as important as that is. To accept John's challenge, we will need to find a way to make our voice heard from the local to the national level. We will need to influence leaders who have the ear of the nation to call all of us to a new national self-understanding.

What might this new national self-understanding be? Let me suggest that it must begin with a confession that we as a nation have borrowed far too much of our identity from our status as a military and economic super power. Our true national strength is not based on weapons or economics. It is based on imagination, creativity, hard work, and compassion. How would it be for us to begin to embrace a new image that is actually an old image most of us were taught in school: liberty and justice for all and people created equal? Perhaps what we have of real value

to offer this world is our strong commitment to freedom and an almost radical insistence on civil liberty. Are we not, like the chosen people of Israel, called to be a light to the nations, not lord of the nations? It is in keeping with the challenge of John the Baptist for churches to call the United States to be that light to the nations by being a model of inclusion, and a model for non-violence, justice, and economic opportunity.

To call our nation to group repentance may be the easier challenge John the Baptist places before us. Beyond that, we are to call the Church to repent and let go being Church as we have *always done it*. John challenges us to call the Church today to confess and repent – to let go a self-understand of moral correctness, theological monopoly, and the tendency to lust for power. It is the call to step up and do as a small group of Christian college students did. They decided the best way to communicate the essential message of faith and the true power of Christianity to their anti-religious peer group was to place a confessional booth right in the middle of a spring Bacchanalian festival on campus. This is part of that conversation:

We are not actually going to accept confessions.” We all looked at him in confusion. He continued, “We are going to confess to them. We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for televangelists, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness, we have misrepresented Jesus on this campus. We will tell people who come into the booth that Jesus loves them. (from *Blue Like Jazz*)

The result of their action was powerful. Rather than being defensive in the face of an attitude of moral superiority, students who came into the confessional booth actually offered forgiveness to those representing the Church. The Christian students felt, at least at some level, a sense of renewed life – born again to what being a follower of Jesus really means.

In this season of preparation for Christmas, how can we prepare ourselves for the kingdom of God as John proclaimed it? How can we celebrate the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed is here among us? We can take the proclamation of John seriously about the need for group repentance. We can take his challenge seriously regarding our responsibilities as citizens of a nation and also citizens of the Kingdom of God.

We live in a modern democratic society with a representative government, a republic, and we have personal responsibility as citizens. Unlike John’s and Jesus’ situation, it is theoretically possible for individuals to address issues with the rulers of our society since *we the people* are the government. It is important for us to do so. The most effective way to influence government and the society at large, in my experience, is to organize – find a group that reflects your most important priorities and add your voice to theirs. Working with an organization can give your values greater clout in a governmental system that respects clout. Some examples of organizations with some clout that reflect some of my most important priorities are Bread for the World (hunger issues both foreign and domestic) and the Baptist Joint Committee (religious liberty and the separation of church and state). At a local level here in Kansas City, MORE² is

putting itself into a position to have some clout based on the number of faith communities involved and represented.

A great deal of good can happen when we work through channels to address and redress societal issues of injustice, and of moral and ethical concerns. Unfortunately, it is rare for a system of power to change itself fundamentally, even in order to address or redress significant societal problems. Systems of power tend toward self preservation, even to the extent of blaming those who attempt corrections. It will be most interesting to watch the Presidential candidates this year in their efforts to bring about real change – how successful they are and how the system responds to their efforts.

What about group repentance by the church? What might it mean for the Christian church to embrace repentance by giving up being church in the way it has gotten used to being church? Could we let go of our institutional insistence on the exclusivity of Christianity for salvation, giving up an attitude of moral superiority arising from a monopoly on correct doctrine? Can we confess a history of seeking and then abusing coercive power? I suspect nothing less than such a radical *giving up* will suffice for us to respect other faiths at a deep level and for the world to live in peace.

Being a light to the nations does not mean Christians have to give up faith in the importance of Jesus. It does not mean we need to turn away from worshiping Christ or give up a belief in the rightness of the Christian path. It does mean being open to the possibility of God's presence in other faith traditions and other belief systems as well as our own. It means being willing to separate the reality of God from our interpretation of that reality.

Jesus' message was as challenging as John's for his people to hear and accept. It was the call to return to the path of Moses and the prophets from which they had strayed. It was time to let go, give up, and go back to the basics of their faith. The same is true in this time and place as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. God still calls us to a way of living that is fundamentally different than the wisdom of self-serving power and self-justifying wealth. God calls us to be new people and to trust that all newness comes as a gift of God.

God sends us out to live in the world, to share good news and a big challenge to change a world of pain into a world of love, justice, and peace. God sends us out to make the earth into a place where the Kingdom is revealed.