

Advent 3C “John said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Lk. 3.7

The American culture that we live in is driven by an overwhelming desire for growth, productivity and profit. This is as true in the business world as it is in the world of religion. Wal-Mart has become a sign, even an icon, of this principle. It is the high form of evolution in the history of retail. Wal-Mart is everywhere and it sells most everything. Oddly, it has become a sign for the arrival of progress for many. On a recent trip to a small town in Virginia our hosts repeatedly asked if we had seen their new Wal-Mart. We couldn't bear to tell them that we had four of them within driving distance of our home, and one of them was a “Super Wal-Mart” replete with that other American icon: McDonald's.

And, if I may coin a phrase, this “walmartization” has swept the world of religion as well. We know this only too well here in little Grand Prairie, at little St. Andrew's. As we go about the business of developing a Parish Profile and searching for the next rector people

are encouraged to take inventory of the benefits and the shortcomings, the strengths and the weaknesses in order to map out a plan for success, growth and fruitfulness. This inevitably raises the question, “What are other congregations doing that is working so well?” What are they selling that the thousands of people are lining up to buy? Can we sell that here at St. Andrew’s? Of course, we never sound as crass as that. But often people begin to “walmartize” the Church by wondering if the overhead projector, the rock band, or the “family life center” is really what makes the Church grow.

While this is a question that regularly circulates through my mind, it was especially acute as I meditated upon our Gospel lesson appointed for the third Sunday in Advent. We were introduced to John the Baptist in our Gospel lesson last week. He was that one written of by the prophet Isaiah, “A voice in the wilderness crying, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”” He called the people of Israel to be baptized for repentance and forgiveness of sins. And he had church growth! By all accounts the multitudes, we might say thousands, came out to meet him in the wilderness down by the Jordan River. There were the regular synagogue goers. But there were also the people that are

called “seekers” in the modern church-growth manuals. These were the outcasts: the prostitutes, the tax-collectors, soldiers and the sinners. The parallel passage in the Gospel according to Matthew mentions that the leadership of the state religion were coming out too! Some of the Pharisees and the Sadducees had come out to meet John and be baptized by him. Why, this is an ideal situation! Could we hope to do any better than John did? I don’t think anyone could. Let us look a little closer to see what the secret to his success was. Luke tells us that, “With many exhortations, he preached the good news to the people.” He preached the good news! Another word for the good news is the Gospel! We can do that! Perhaps we should notice what this good news was, according to John. Luke says that the contents of John’s sermon were, “You brood of vipers! Who warned to flee from the wrath to come?” Oh dear. I don’t believe that they sell that at Wal-Mart.

Is this really a message of good news? If I had asked you to tell me what you thought the message of the Gospel was, would you have told me this? But if we assume for a moment that this was indeed John’s message, does it make any sense that all of these people from different walks of life were coming out to hear his message? I doubt

they would today. We prefer to hear comfortable words as we sit in our comfortable pews, or theatre seating. In the public market place “Christian music” is now listed as “inspirational music”. Was John’s message inspirational? Perhaps, but likely not according to the modern palate. But was it good news? Let us see.

John’s words came as a warning to the Jews, God’s special people.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Ministers today don’t engage in name calling as a general rule, but it was a regular practice among the prophets of the Old Testament. They regularly called the Israelites perverts following in the way of Sodom and Gomorrah, prostitutes and even donkeys.

Calling the people vipers was John’s powerful way of bringing to their minds the dangerous and rebellious position that they were in at the coming of the Lord. It was the Devil in the form of the snake that had tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden and had received the curse from the Lord. It was by poisonous snakes that the Lord had punished the Israelites in their wilderness journey from Egypt. The prophets described the rebellious, heathen nations as the great sea serpent. The snake was despicable in its posture, crawling along in

the dust. The viper was feared for its ability to bring death by surprise. So John's message is clear: his listeners were not the Lord's children, but the children of the king of death, Satan himself.

So much for John's address, but what about the wrath that was coming? There was a time when preachers were more willing to preach about divine wrath. But most Episcopalians I know, who used to be Baptist, mention "fire and brimstone" sermons as one of the reasons they became Episcopalian. The people of our day hope to hear an encouraging message; something to live by; a word to meditate upon in the coming week. But John seemed convinced that there was some major event that was right around the corner. He, like Isaiah, Amos and so many of the other prophets, saw that the time had come for the Lord to reap the fruit from his vineyard. He was coming in person this time, and he wanted the grapes from his vines.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield

grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

John's good news was that time was running out! The summer was drawing to a close and the autumn harvest was right around the corner! The Lord, the King of Israel was coming with his servants to collect a full harvest, and all John could see was a bunch of snakes! The good news was that there was still time to turn around. There was still time to go the other way and bear good fruit. In other words, the John's good news was that there was still time to repent before the

Lord tore down the walls and turned his vineyard over to the Roman armies. But the time was short. The axe was already sharpened to a fine edge and the woodsman was making his way through the orchard, checking to see which of the trees had fruit on them and which ones were just taking up space.

What solution did John propose and how did he exhort the people? First of all he told them to stop devouring one another and instead to serve one another. They must clothe the naked and feed the hungry. Tax-collectors, who made their living charging commissions on the taxes owed, should bankrupt themselves by only collecting what was owed. Soldiers should get out the of the protection and extortion racket and be content with their wages.

But more than this the Jews had to abandon their sense of entitlement to the Lord's protection and preferential treatment. They did not control him. He did not live in a box: not the Ark of the Covenant or the Temple in Jerusalem. They had fondly hoped that they could behave anyway that they liked and the God that had made a covenant with Abraham and had adopted them at Sinai would be

obliged to tolerate their wickedness. Because they were the seed of Abraham they would anticipate the Lord's judgment on the Day of the Lord with expectation and joy. But John warned them even as the prophet Amos had warned their forefathers:

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The good news of John's preaching was that the Jews would fail to achieve the salvation they sought if they depended upon their

association with Abraham. God had made Abraham, and he had made them. But if they would not give him the fruit of righteousness and the light of holiness which he demanded of them, then he could make children for Abraham out of the rocks that filled up that dry and dusty land. Their privileged position would not spare them from destruction. Rather, their privilege would be a sign and a testimony against them. Even so Jesus himself proclaimed, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold something greater than Jonah is here." The sign of Jonah and the sign of Nineveh is that the Jewish Jonah would not repent of his anger at the mercy of the Lord. Yet the men of Nineveh, pagan though they were; believed the word of the Lord thru his prophet Jonah, repented and were saved.

I doubt that Wal-Mart sells humble pie, but it is that very item that John offered to his audience that swelled and thronged around him.

Add to that list the Fruit of the Spirit and you may very well have the full menu that John proposed to his listeners as he stood along the banks of the Jordan River. John himself could not give them the Spirit of the Lord, but he was sure that the one who was soon to come after would divide the wicked from the good and baptize them with fire and the Holy Ghost. It was Jesus himself who would gather true Israel, those of all nations who believed in his name, and give them the gift of the Spirit.

Let us, my friends, consider carefully how it is that we receive this stout, severe, bracing, but good news from that faithful servant John the Baptist. For we must bear fruit that befits repentance. Shall we not come before God Almighty in humility, clinging only to the salvation offered to us in the cross, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus? Let us beg of him his Holy Spirit that we may be converted and made sons and heirs of his eternal kingdom. Shall not come to our neighbor, meekly asking his forgiveness for those things we have done against them? Let us give honor where honor is due; serving those who are in need; preferring others to ourselves; speaking the truth in love; always preserving the good name of our

neighbor. And shall we not bear fruits of repentance in our own hearts? Let us put away anger, selfishness, fornication and laziness and replace them with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Do not wait to bear this fruit, for the Lord shall come to judge the Earth with righteousness and justice. If we bear a bumper crop then we may look forward to that great day with joy and gladness. He shall not come in wrath to those who have longed for his appearing with gardens of good works budding in his name. AMEN