

**“Sons and Daughters or Brood of Vipers?” Baptism of the Lord, Jan. 9 & 10, 2022**  
**Luke 3:1-17, 21-22; Isaiah 60:1-6 NRSV New London UMC Rev. Joyce Rich**

It would seem that there were no “grey areas” when it came to baptism with John the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Either you repent of your sins and begin to bear good fruit, or you’ll be cut down and thrown in the fire. For John, the water of baptism would nourish the trees that produce good fruit. While the ax was poised to cut off at the root those trees that did not bear good fruit. Folks could decide if they wanted to be fire wood or bear good fruit. Or, to use a different metaphor, they could collectively continue to be a brood of vipers headed for judgment. However, if the brood repented, well then they could be baptized and live as the sons and daughters of God.

Do you get the feeling that John’s matter-of-factness **REALLY** got peoples’ attention and brought them up short? Almost like they’d been slapped by what he said? I am intrigued by this image of a crowd of people, from all walks of life, that presses in around John, and they pepper him with their questions.

**They ask:** “What then should we do?!”

**John replies:** “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

**The tax collectors ask:** “Teacher, what should we do?”

**John replies:** “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

**The soldiers ask:** “And we, what should we do?”

**John replies:** “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Wait a minute! The gospel writer specifically calls out the tax collectors and soldiers – people who were stereotyped as being most likely to take advantage of their positions to pad their own pockets. These were people who might be carrying around some guilt about things they had done. They might have wanted to check out this wild guy, John, who has proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. . . . But even though the tax collectors and soldiers are called out here, they obviously were not the only folks who found it very appealing to think they *might be able* to go to the Jordan River and lay down the burden of sin they’ve been carrying. The tax collectors and the soldiers probably weren’t alone in wanting to repent to find forgiveness, or who were drawn to the idea of being washed free of their sins. **EVERYONE** who went down to the shore of the Jordan River wanted to know what they needed to do to be free of their sins! They **ALL** had that in common. And John told them to bear fruits worthy of repentance: if they had the resources to help someone else – then they should be generous and compassionate and help other people out; if they had been overcharging people – then they needed to drop their rates to what they should be; if they’d been taking pay offs and

intimidating or threatening people – well they needed to stop doing that, and instead put their focus back on doing the work you were already being paid to do.

It's not like John told them anything that they probably didn't already know. I mean, most of us are already pretty clear about what our sins are. But what we like to deny is that we also know what it would take to repent of those sins. What we'd have to stop doing; what we would need to give up; what we would have to change in our lives. We also probably know why we haven't been willing to repent and make those changes up to now, why we have lacked the motivation to "get to it." But John asks us to consider this question: What good fruit could be growing in place of that sin in our lives? . . . That's worth considering, isn't it? . . . And perhaps instead of staying wound up in this "sin that has been" in our lives – we could re-focus on "what could be" growing in our lives? What do we hope could be true for us from this point forward as we live into our future?

Perhaps Isaiah's message of hope from God is what we need to hear to encourage us:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

My sisters and brothers, as the baptized children of God there is always hope for the future. Do not fear, for God has redeemed us. God has called each one of us by name, and has claimed all of us as God's own beloved children. While all of this naming and claiming does not make us perfect or infallible, it does mean that we are God's own. And also means that God will not give up on us. God isn't going anywhere. God will still be with us – no matter how much we may turn away from God, or how far we may wander off into sin – God does not abandon us to the troubles we bring on ourselves. God just patiently waits for us to ask, "What then should we do?" Because God is ready to reply, "Do not fear. You are my Beloved. Repent and bear good fruit." And we can remember, once again, that we are the baptized children of God.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.