

Be Joyful – Jesus comes to save us

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John the Baptist would be run out of most churches in the western world.

Pastors just don't call their congregations names like "You brood of vipers!"

They don't scold their people or berate them saying "Who warned you to flee from God's wrath to come?"

And most western Christians don't really believe that God gets angry with us anymore.

No – our pastors are expected to preach "nice" sermons about gentle Jesus and being good.

So now, most people –even non-Christians -- believe that eternal paradise is the automatic destiny for good people.

And when we believe that, there is really no need to pay attention to God or the Bible at all.

We are in control of our own destiny.

And to God, we are as lost in darkness as any atheist.

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Well, that puts us in an awkward place today,

since it is the Bible – God's very own Word

– that has John the Baptist telling off the good people who have come to the Jordan river.

What exactly is the problem? That's a good question to ask.

The key is in the rebuke John gives to the brood of vipers: “Bear fruit that befits repentance!”

Vipers are poisonous snakes or serpents – like the one that got humanity in trouble in the Garden of Eden.

Vipers are deceivers – they look like they are asleep and then – Hiss! They lash out and bite with venom.

The serpent in the garden deceived Adam and Eve into rebelling against the boundary God had set for them.

And now, this brood of vipers wants to deceive themselves – and John – into thinking that a little water was all it would take

to avoid the dire consequences of breaking the covenant God had made with his people.

But John was God’s prophet – filled with the wisdom and discernment of the Holy Spirit – and he was having none of it.

- “Show me you are taking God seriously when you come to be baptized.”
- “Show me you grasp what is at stake when I tell you the Messiah is coming and the kingdom of God is at hand.”
- “Live as people who strive to uphold *God’s* covenant and not the world’s standards of goodness.”

And there’s the rub – for those good people at the Jordan and for us.

In the culture of the Roman Empire,

- it was acceptable to be greedy,

- get rich at the expense of the poor,
- and to accept bribes and extort money from others.

As we know from the story of the rich man and Lazarus, it was culturally acceptable for rich people to completely ignore the poor altogether.

You could be a corrupt, filthy rich, unjust slave master and still be considered a “good person” by others.

But not by God.

And that is the problem for us, too, isn't it?

We are satisfied to be considered “good” by our culture and are deceived into thinking it is the same as being good in God’s eyes.

We settle for being liked rather than being loved.

We are seduced by the culture’s rationale for changing what God has said

so that behavior God has set boundaries around is no longer considered off-limits.

We do these things and are still considered by ourselves and others to be “good people”.

But the Bible reminds us that God’s word stands firm and, sadly, the consequences are ours to bear by our own choices.

Our culture, too, allows us to ignore the poor, and even commends us for judging them and consigning them to third-class status.

They don't deserve our love because they don't measure up to our standards, we tell ourselves.

God makes no such judgments against the poor.

But God does judge those who do. And it isn't pretty!

Our culture is always telling us that we don't have enough, that we deserve more and better.

- The bigger the profit margin, the better.
- Remember that all advertising targets the rich.
- And when the demand for more and more increases, the gap between poor and rich gets wider.

Our culture also tells us that it is the place of the weak to serve the strong.

- Bullying and intimidation is a manifestation of this belief.
- So are scams, and get-rich-quick schemes
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But God's covenant lays out a different way of being.

- Contentment instead of greed.
- Honesty instead of corruption.
- Seeking the best for others – and especially the most vulnerable –

If we come before God thinking we are good people, we deceive ourselves like the vipers we are.

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What John is announcing is a new beginning—a new start that demands a response that takes God seriously.

Because the kingdom of God that Jesus brings is exactly as Zephaniah describes it:

- The culture that deceives us and leads us astray is overthrown.
 - No more politics, telemarketing, or internet
- The bullies are overpowered and terrorists removed from the earth.
 - No more Al quaida, Taliban, KuKluxKlan or gangs
 - No more mean girls or rapists or shooters
- There are no more rich and poor, but all have what they need.
 - Casinos will shut down, the stock market will crash,
 - debts will be erased and neighbors will help neighbors
- The lame are healed and the outcast included in love.
 - No more disease or crippling affliction, no more ghettos
 - No more border walls needed
- Truth replaces dishonesty
 - No more fake news, blackmail, or fraud
- and **life conquers death.**
- **Jesus opens graves and raises the dead!**

This Jesus is coming, people of God! God's kingdom is taking over.

Jesus is the Lord our God in our midst whose victory over death and the grave is our victory.

Jesus is the one who does all this.

He removes the disaster our sin brings upon us and forgives us

so that we don't have to spend our time wringing our hands in worry about our future.

Jesus comes to bring us home.

Truly home – with God – who delights in us, sings over us, and rejoices over us.

Jesus comes to make us new in the love of God.

Sing aloud, people of God.

Rejoice and exult with all your heart!

Today, Jesus clothes you with God's goodness.

Today, Jesus calls you out of darkness into the light of his life.

Like the sinners who came to the Jordan, make new choices in your lives.

Take action to live as people in whom God delights.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AySe5pZnwig>