

“Dungeons and Vipers”

REPENT! RETURN THE LORD! THE AX IS AT THE ROOT READY TO DESTROY YOU AND ALL YOUR SINFUL WAYS!

Oh my but I am dazzled by the image of John as he is painted in this passage. I can just see him standing on an outcropping of rock above the crowd gathered on the riverbank. He is gaunt from his days in the wilderness and lack of food. His hair and beard are bedraggled. His skin is sunburnt and leathery. His hair shirt is dirty and held together by his leather belt. His feet and legs are bare. He raises one arm, points at the crowd and growls at them, “You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”¹

What power there is in that image. I understand why the fire and brimstone preachers love to go down that road. There is something very satisfying about telling a crowd of comfortable people they are vipers. There is something very powerful about having those who are already frightened hanging on every word wanting to know how to get out of the mess that they feel they are in.

What many fire and brimstone preachers have not learned is that being satisfied and powerful is not what John was about. Read this passage carefully and we see that this is a bit of a rhetorical ploy on John’s part. He is using this hellfire and damnation language to get the crowd’s attention and to wake them up.

He knows he has their attention when the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”² It is at this point that we hear the main teaching of John. He responds to average citizen saying, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”³ He tells the tax collectors, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”⁴ He tells the Roman soldiers “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”⁵

Note the three groups he speaks to. First the citizens, then the tax collectors who work for the Roman overlords, and then the Roman soldiers who are part of the occupying army of Israel. Then note what he tells each. The citizens are to care for the poor. The tax collectors are to not overcharge on the taxes. The soldiers are not to extort or threaten the populace. He does not tell them to make an arduous pilgrimage, take on some complex spiritual practice, or give up everything and live as a hermit. He says that in order to avoid the wrath to come one should be kind and ethical. This is the stuff we learn in

¹ Luke 3:7 NRSV

² Luke 3:10 NRSV

³ Luke 3:11 NRSV

⁴ Luke 3:13 NRSV

⁵ Luke 3:14 NRSV

kindergarten, not the stuff of philosophy or theology. Yet it also seems that these are not universal practices. Otherwise, he would not be reminding folks to live this way.

As compelling as the Gospel passage is the snippet from Paul's letter to the Philippians should not be overlooked. In this passage Paul is writing from a jail in Rome. I picture Paul in a dungeon shackled with chains (it is probably an image from a Sunday School booklet from my childhood). There is Paul with some of his followers and they have gotten hold of papyrus and ink and a pen and he is dictating a letter to his beloved congregation in Philippi. Despite his shackles and wretched living conditions the word he sends them, and us, is "rejoice."

Imagine being in a dungeon or some similarly squalid circumstances while awaiting trial knowing full well that you are likely to be convicted and put to death. Would the first word out of our mouth be rejoice? Yet that is what Paul writes. He reinforces it by saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice."⁶ We might well be justified in thinking that Paul was off his rocker.

Paul is not. Rather he is telling us to live in the joy of God's love at all times. Regardless of our situation or circumstances we have the option of living out of a place where God's love is the only thing. He is telling us that is where full life exists. There is an old saying, that "when the going gets tough the tough get going." What Paul is telling us is when the going gets tough the tough go deep. We go deep into our hearts, and into our prayers and into God.

John McCain and other POWs have recounted how the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23, other passages of scripture, hymns, and prayers sustained them during the severe conditions of imprisonment. It works in less severe conditions as well.

Additionally, rejoicing is not a solitary activity. An older definition of rejoice is sharing joy with others. Just like the POWs who upheld each other, forgave each other when they broke down, and shared the meagre food they had. We can rejoice and share the joy in our own more comfortable times. And what better time to get started on that practice than today when our candle is *Gaudete*, joy to the world, joy for everyone.

Joy is not transient. It is a deep well. It is a well we did within ourselves with the help of God. As the well gets deeper the water of life keeps filling it up. Every shovelful of dirt we extract makes more room for the living water that Jesus promised the Samaritan woman at the well and us. As that water fills you up with joy share it with others. Don't keep it to yourself it is meant to be rejoiced with all.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding make joyful your hearts and minds now and forever.

⁶ Philippians 4:4 NRSV