

Uncomfortable Words **December 12, 2021**

One of my favorite shows was the sitcom “The Office” (the American version). The show depicts the daily goings-on of office life at a small paper company. The show is witty; the characters are both over-the-top and yet also very life-like, like people you’ve met; and the storyline is full of heart-warming moments.

I have to confess though, when I first watched the show, in the first season, I did not like it. In fact, I still don’t like the first season. The reason is because the boss of the office, played by Steve Carrell, is cringeworthy. And that’s the best way to describe him. He is awkward; he takes jokes too far; he is just kind of clueless.

For example, he thinks of himself as a practical joker. So as a joke, he tells the receptionist that she’s fired. She breaks down crying, and the boss sits there and looks at her, surprised and speechless, until finally he says, “Just kidding.” Cringeworthy. And so watching the show at first, I just felt uncomfortable.

Fortunately, the actor toned down some of his character’s quirks, the show improved after that. But even now, if I go back and watch the first season, I still feel uncomfortable because of his behavior.

The same is true when I hear John the Baptist, but for entirely different reasons. John isn’t awkward or a bad jokester; he just says some really harsh truths. I think his goal is to leave people feeling uncomfortable, and he succeeded with his listeners in at the Jordan River in the 1st century, and he succeeds with us today.

It’s a lovely day; people come out to see this novel preached by the Jordan. They get there, and they hear:

“You brood of vipers! What do you want?”

“The ax is sitting right next to the tree, ready to cut down any tree that doesn’t bear good fruit and be thrown into the fire.”

“The Messiah is already holding his winnowing fork, and will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Yowza. I mean, this is the Christmas season. Church is supposed to be calm and peaceful and picture-esque, and we want Advent to be a gentle lead-up to that moment. After all, just listen to our other readings today:

“Sing aloud, my daughter Zion; Rejoice and exult with all your heart!”

“I will trust in God and not be afraid”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone... The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds”

It’s the 3rd Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of joy. And John just makes people uncomfortable! I don’t even know what a viper is, and I don’t like it.

I do want to take a look at what John is saying, because some of his metaphors are clear, and some are not.

He starts off with, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” That’s pretty clearly not a nice compliment, to call people snakes. The background behind that is that when vipers hatch, they stay together with their mother and siblings for a period, until they begin to mature. But if a predator or threat were to come upon the brood of snakes, they would scatter and flee. These people coming to John remind him of a cohort of snakes running away from a threat.

The 2nd image John gives is of an ax lying at the root of a tree. Every tree that doesn’t bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. That picture is pretty clear.

The 3rd and final image is the Messiah with a winnowing fork in his hand, and there’s all kinds of strange vocabulary like “threshing floor,” “chaff,” and “granary.” I think it’s good to have a brief lesson on the wheat-harvesting process.

To start, you cut the whole wheat plant, which has the long stalk and the grain at the head
You lay the whole wheat plant on the threshing floor, and you either have oxen walk over it, or you beat it with sticks

That separates the stalks from the head, and you take out the stalks (clear the threshing floor)
Then you have the head (the good part that you want), but there are two parts in the head – there’s the wheat itself, and then there’s the inedible husk around the wheat grain, called the chaff

Now it’s time for winnowing. You take your wheat heads outside on a windy day, and you throw them up in the air (using a narrow pitchfork – a winnowing fork – or a flat basket)

-The heavy wheat grains fall right back down

-The light, wispy husks, the chaff, blow to the side in the wind.

That chaff makes great kindling and it burns hot – hence the ‘unquenchable fire’ imagery

The good grain going into the granary, the storage building

So there are 3 scary, harsh, uncomfortable images in John the Baptist’s words to the crowds. And then, “with many other such words, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Not only did John ruin Christmas, but he apparently thinks we should be happy about what he has to say!

But I think the folks who chose our readings for Advent are making a point. You need to do some tough inner work before you can celebrate Christmas. I would compare it to eating some cake. You could eat that piece of chocolate cake, and it will be delicious, but think of how much more delicious it will be if you work out and then eat the cake.

Advent is meant to be a spiritual workout. That’s nice you came for the baby Jesus, but that’s not the whole story.

There’s preparation, work to be done.

What kind of work is there to be done, you ask? Well, that's a great question! One, in fact, that the crowds asked John after he spouted all of this off.

First off, John says, "Don't think that you are righteous just because you belong to a certain group." The folks who are coming to John are Jewish, the children of Abraham, God's chosen people. But John says, "That doesn't matter."

What matters, John says, is justice. What you do.

If you have extra clothing or food, give it to people who have none.

If you are a tax collector, don't cheat people out of their money to line your own pockets. Do your job fairly.

And then we hear that it's not just Jews who are there. There are Roman soldiers as well! And I imagine all the Jews who are there listening, who just got called "vipers" and "useless trees," are just waiting. They're rubbing their hands together, whispering, "Oh boy, he's gonna let these evil soldiers have it!"

And then he doesn't! John just says, "If you are a soldier, don't threaten people to give you money. Don't bully them into paying you off."

Live with justice and fairness.

So we, the listeners, are left to deal with this, probably with some discomfort. Which group do we find ourselves in?

The self-righteous religious people, the cheating tax collectors, or the bullying extorting soldiers?

Also, don't we have extra clothes in our closets? Extra food that gets thrown away? Extra money that's just sitting in an account?

John's words hit close to home. They are designed to make his listeners feel uncomfortable... and they do.

We're pretty good at giving during the holidays. But John's words don't just apply to the Advent and Christmas seasons. We're called to give clothing, food, money to those in need all year. To work towards a more just world all year. To shed the chaff of selfishness and fear of not having enough, even when we have way more than we need.

And when we can do that, when we can give from our abundance, when there is no more cheating or extortion... that is good news. The result will be a just world, a world that embodies God's kingdom.

First comes discomfort, then some inner work, and then... good news. Amen.