

Grace and peace to you from God and the Holy Spirit, and from Jesus Christ, who invites us into repentance, so that our lives may bear good fruit. Amen.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

That's such a great line... it's one of my favorite lines... you brood of vipers. John doesn't really mince words, does he?

But I get where he's coming from – he's calling out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who are just showing up to cover their bases.

You see, John the Baptist, who proclaimed in the wilderness that the Messiah was coming and that God's glory would be revealed... he was very much like the prophet Elijah... with his camel-hair clothing and leather belt... and his diet of locusts and honey.

...a bit eccentric, if you will, but very popular!

Isaiah's vision was that a voice in the wilderness would proclaim the coming Messiah, and John shows up on the scene like a new Elijah! ...and the people are coming from all around to hear him preach.

So, I can't blame the religious leaders for being curious... they know their scripture, so it is possible this guy might be the real deal... and if he is, they'd want to be sure they kept their place of privilege among the religious elite.

And yet... John calls them out. You brood of vipers... who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Judgement is coming... you think you can avoid it by going through the motions of baptism, even though you remain unwilling to live lives that reflect God's love?

To our ears... we hear the words judgment and wrath and fire... and it conjures up images of Hell... at least, Hell according to Dante's Inferno.

I won't go off on this tangent now, but most of our ideas of Hell come from Dante, and not from the Bible.

And yet, there are so many in our modern day who, like the Pharisees and Sadducees... they cling to ideas of wrath and judgment as some kind of cosmic punishment for not going through the motions... for not checking the boxes for all to see.

...wrath and judgment that will come to others, of course... certainly not them.

I'm thinking of those who claim the name Christian in one breath... and then with their next breath... turn away the stranger, the refugee, and the immigrant...

how easily they forget that our Lord and Savior was himself, a stranger and a refugee, and we are commanded by God to welcome them as one of our own.

And those who sing about God's love for them in one breath... and then turn around and spew hate and spread violence against those whose love they disapprove of... how easily they forget that God shows up, again and again, on the side of love.

Or those who feel so satisfied in their eternal future because they have stated publicly that Jesus Christ is their personal Lord and Savior, but have never considered that becoming a follower of Jesus means actually following the actions of Jesus...

namely feeding the poor, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and causing a right scene by turning over the tables of greed and injustice...

How easily people claim a personal and individual salvation... while forgetting that Jesus came to save the entire world...

forgetting that a true life of faith can only be lived in community with others, working to make sure everyone is provided for... that no one is forgotten...

So yeah... John the Baptist... doesn't have much patience for hypocrisy... and truth be told... neither do I. ...and I doubt you do either.

But there's a lot of it in our world today. And yet... here's the thing... John is harsh... but he's still offering them... the brood of vipers... he's still offering them good news.

...Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance... John says... don't rest on your heritage and your position... What God wants from you is for your life to bear good fruit.

He's not turning them away... he's inviting them in... his words are harsh, but he presumes that they, and we, have the capacity to rise up and meet the challenge... to bear the good fruit that God created us to bear.

It's not about going through the motions so others can see how holy you are... it's about what's in your heart. Do you truly want to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

When you come to the waters of baptism, are you ready to die every day to your sin, and to rise every day, washed clean and ready to live according to God's will?

When you come to the waters of baptism... are you willing to confess the times you have fallen short of God's will... to release your sins and repent... and receive God's forgiveness so that you can start again?

When you come to the waters of baptism... are you willing to let your life be shaped by Christ?

Jesus longs for you to say yes... yes to all of it... so that you might be part of the joy that is living in the light and love of Christ.

John invites his followers to be baptized with water... just as we still do today...

A tangible sign of being washed clean and renewed... paired with the eternal promise of Christ's forgiveness and faithfulness.

The action of baptism is only needed once, but the remembrance of baptism is a daily practice... a daily practice of confession and repentance... a practice that re-aligns our lives back to God and Christ Jesus.

Repentance means to literally change your mind... your heart... your direction.

John, in the wilderness, says he baptizes with water for repentance, but the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit... and with fire.

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor ...he will gather his wheat into the granary, and the chaff he will burn with... unquenchable fire."

To quote Deb... Daaaannng.

There's that fire again... judgment and unquenchable fire... mixed with images from Dante.

It's terrifying... but let me swap out those images from Dante... for something different.

So, my friend Paul is retired, and his passion is working with conservation efforts and protecting the environment. One of the things he does... is he helps with controlled burns.

Controlled burns are fires that are intentionally set and managed, and they actually improve ecosystem health by reducing the amount of hazardous fuels like dead and dried undergrowth, which reduces the risk of extreme fires.

They also restore habitats, control invasive species, and promote native plant growth by mimicking the natural fire cycle.

We think of forest and prairie fires as bad things... but they are actually necessary for clearing away the stuff that accumulates and harms the ecosystem... they are necessary for clearing away the chaff... if you will.

When we hear John the Baptist preaching of the coming judgment that will separate the wheat from the chaff... and that the fate of the chaff is to burn in an unquenchable fire...

We are inclined to think that the wheat are those people who are right with Jesus... and the chaff are those who aren't... those who are going to Dante's hell.

Except... We might forget that wheat and chaff are all part of the same plant. (x2)

The Salt Project commentary states, "What the wind and fire remove are the husks that get in the way: the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that make us less generous, less just, or less respectful of others.

There is a line between good and evil, but it doesn't run between groups; it runs through the heart of each person. What each of us requires is restoration, liberation from whatever "husks" are holding us back."

So yes, indeed, through Jesus, we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire... not a fire that destroys, though, but a fire that purifies... that cleanses us of our junk... a fire that restores us to good health...

This is not a fire that we should fear... this fire is a gift... a gift that we receive when we open our hearts to confession and repentance for our sins.

When we step into the fire of the Holy Spirit, it cleanses our hearts, washes us clean... and makes us new... it makes us capable of producing good fruit!

John's invitation to fully and truly receive the gift of repentance is the key to his challenge that our lives bear good fruit. ...and this invitation is open to all.

And Christ longs for all people to accept.

John's language and mannerisms are harsh... but his message is sound. Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near! Christ has come near!

Repent... and allow the fire of the Spirit to cleanse your heart.

Take comfort in the promise that the winnowing fork is in Christ's hand... Christ, who is full of mercy and grace... and with wind and fire, Christ will not destroy... but refine... restore... and empower you as a child of God, to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Amen.