

I wanted all of you to receive the Schreiner family Christmas card this year. But to save on postage, I decided to share it with you here. We really wanted to include the perfect passage to express Christmas joy, so we did some searching, and I think we nailed it. ***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”*** Mmm...pure Christmas joy, right?

Ok, I'll be honest. That's not really our Christmas card. We love you all, but our baby's due in a month, so we don't have time to send Christmas cards! But if we did, would that message fill your heart with Christmas joy? Probably not.

That's why it seems strange to find those words in the selected Gospel for this weekend, historically called, *“Gaudete”* or “Rejoice” Sunday. For “Rejoice Sunday,” John the Baptist's words sound surprisingly devoid of... joy. Or so it might seem.

If that has you wondering, ***“John the Baptist: Preacher of Joy?”*** let's dig deeper into his message to see that John is indeed a preacher of beautiful, comforting joy; joy that will help prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming.

Most people know John for his camel's hair wardrobe and locust and wild honey diet. But most importantly, John was God's chosen messenger, to baptize the people and preach to the crowds, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*** God called John to prepare people for the Savior's arrival, just as the prophet Malachi foretold, ***“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me”*** and Isaiah prophesied, ***“A voice of one calling in the desert, “Prepare the way for the Lord.”***

And so the crowds came. But they didn't exactly receive a joyful welcome as John addressed the crowds, ***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”***

John wasn't just addressing the Pharisees and other self-righteous religious leaders with that cutting nickname, like we might expect. Rather, John addresses everyone in the crowd as a “brood” or offspring of vipers.

As a desert dweller, John knew about vipers. Although they're usually not very large, vipers are extremely deceptive. They often look like sticks on the ground...until they strike. Then, what seemed harmless reveals itself as one of the deadliest poisonous snakes.

It's fitting then, that John calls the crowds “children of vipers.” These people had been filled with a deadly venom by their forefathers, their religious leaders, and ultimately...by THE Serpent, Satan. John warns, ***“Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.”***

The deadly venom was the deceptive belief that they were saved because they could trace their bloodline to Abraham, and because they performed outward rituals. Because they were Israelites, and because they went through the motions, they thought they could live however they wanted; like Father Abraham was their “get into heaven free” card.

The crowds were clueless how deadly Satan's deception was, so John couldn't be a preacher of joy. At least, not yet. Instead, John gave them a heavy dose of law as a reality check about their tenuous spiritual condition. ***“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** Because they didn't think they needed to repent of anything, they weren't producing fruits of repentance. And that left them ripe for judgment.

But God had a broader audience in mind for John's message than just the Pharisees and Israelites. We need to hear it too. Now, I assume most of you aren't banking on your Israelite heritage for your salvation. But maybe you're trusting in some different "bloodlines." If, like these crowds, we trust in some external identity we have, or some outward actions we perform as the source of our salvation, God's grace very easily becomes a license to live for ourselves.

If "I'm a Lutheran" satisfies your conscience to live like a heathen, then the Serpent has struck. If your FVL letter jacket makes you believe you can live according to the world's standards for teenagers instead of God's expectations, the Serpent has struck. If "I send my kids to Mount Olive school, or Sunday School" convinces you you're off the hook for their spiritual lives, the Serpent has struck. If sitting in these pews, or volunteering your time, or putting your offering in the plate, or preaching the sermon makes you feel excused to pick up your sins again as you leave those doors, the Serpent has struck.

We struggle with "cognitive dissonance." Cognitive dissonance means that although we know we sin, we rationalize our wrongs away with excuses why it wasn't wrong, trying to psychologically alleviate our guilt. We could teach a masters' class on the art of excusing away our sins, right?

But if we rely on those bloodlines, Satan's self-righteous poison works its way to our hearts to kill us. We need John's warning to echo in our ears-- The ax is at the roots, ready to chop down fruitless trees and throw them into the fire. A preacher of joy? No. At least, not yet. The crowds needed to realize that they were poisoned before John could give them the antidote.

Some of the crowd were cut to the heart by God's law. Confronted with their sin and understanding their need for forgiveness, the people confessed their sins, urgently pleading with John, ***"What should we do then?"***

That's when the heart of John's joyful message comes to the forefront. John takes these broken sinners into the waters of the Jordan River to administer ***"a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins."*** The same Jordan River the Israelites passed through to enter into the Promised Land after their wandering in the wilderness, is where God brings these people to a new life after their wandering in the wilderness of Satan's self-righteous deception and slavery to sin. Forgiveness coming through faith in the Savior John came to prepare people's hearts for. Just as God did for you at your baptism, where he transformed you from a child of The Serpent, to God's own child!

But note, this was a baptism of "repentance." Many people think repentance is about emotions. Like we're repentant if we feel really bad, or sad about our sin. And a repentant person will certainly feel sadness and guilt over their sin. But my nearly 3-year old daughter can cry really hard when she's in trouble, only to do the same sinful thing again with a smile once the discipline is over. I also have a 30-year old heart that's very adept at doing the same thing. True repentance isn't about "emotion," as much as it's about "motion."

Repentance is literally "turning." To turn away from sin. Repentance means having your heart and mind changed about sin. Our sinful hearts naturally view sin as "joy" to pursue. Repentance leads us to view sin as spiritually deadly poison it is, as repulsive, not desirable. The way you'd change your mind about chugging a glass of water on a hot day, when you realize it's salt water.

But if our hearts naturally view sin as joy, how can our hearts be changed about sin? It can only happen through God's powerful Word. That's why John's message sounds so joyless initially. People first need to be cut with the law, before they can be healed with the gospel.

It's kind of like your muscles. Did you know that you have to literally break down your muscles to get stronger? Exercise damages muscle fibers, then your body goes to work repairing them by making new thicker, stronger

muscle fibers. In order to build up, you first need to break down. Repentance works the same way. God works through his law to break down our self-righteous hearts and turn us away from sin.

But then comes the other part of repentance. We need something to turn to, someone to turn to--a solution for our sin. And so we finally meet John the Baptist: preacher of joy, as he fulfills the purpose for which God sent him. ***“One more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”***

John prepares the peoples’ hearts by pointing them to Jesus, who he would later call ***“The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”*** John ***“preached the good news”*** of Jesus to the people, to assure them that salvation wouldn’t be won by their bloodline, but by the Savior’s innocent blood, shed on the cross.

Repentance is turning, but it’s also trusting. By faith, trusting that Christ has won us forgiveness for every sin. Trusting that as God promised, the child born in Bethlehem came to bring us eternal joy by crushing the Serpent’s head. By removing the venom of sin from our hearts.

That good news of Jesus produces buds of joy in our lives. And as our faith grows, those buds of joy blossom into fruits of repentance—actions that display our joy and faith in Christ. Not grudgingly trying to placate God so he’ll bless us. But to repeatedly tap into the joy that is ours through our union with Christ, because has blessed us with forgiveness and salvation!

What will that Gospel-produced fruit look like in our lives? John encouraged the crowds ***“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none; the one who has food should do the same.”*** To tax collectors, John encouraged, ***“Don’t collect more than you’re required to.”*** To soldiers, he encouraged, ***“Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”***

Notice, John doesn’t tell them to quit their professions. Rather, joyfully carry out their professions with honesty. He doesn’t tell the crowds to sell everything and go live in the wilderness or a monastery. He tells them, out of your abundance, joyfully care for others.

Our fruit looks the same. Joyfully using the gifts God has given us to honor and glorify him. Joyfully and faithfully carrying out our different vocations. Joyfully showing love to each other. How can we do that? Because ***“the joy of the LORD is your strength.”***

We won’t always do it perfectly. At times, our tree might look sparse, and the Serpent will strike with his venom of guilt or apathy. At those times, cling to the one who crushed the Serpent’s head; the most perfectly fruitful tree, who was cut down to save the fruitless, that we might produce fruit! In repentance, turn from sin, and trust in the one John joyfully proclaimed at the Jordan. Rejoice in the one who has come, and is coming again, to ***“gather his wheat into his barn.”*** I will say it again. Rejoice!