

Luke 3:7-18/Dec. 12, 2021/Advent 3C

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, what is your favorite fruit? Can you think of a bad fruit? I was sitting in my office thinking about that on Friday. Is there a bad fruit?

Apples, pears, plums, persimmons, pomegranates, bandannas, limes, lemons, grapefruit, coconuts, all of the berries, watermelon... I couldn't think of one bad fruit. Well, not a bad fruit off of a tree or vine anyway.

In the gospel reading we have today, there is actually a bad fruit mentioned. It's hard to tell, because the English is translated differently. But, brood of vipers in the Greek is actually fruit of vipers. That kind of opens up this text, doesn't it?

Fruit of vipers. Interesting. Not just that they come from vipers, but that they make more vipers, because fruit has seed in it which makes more fruit.

So, you can be a good fruit or you can be a bad fruit. Good fruit brings life and bad fruit, fruit of vipers, brings death. Fruit of vipers is filled with venom and it perpetrates more venom.

Now, we could argue that vipers only use their venom when they are hungry or as a mode of self-defense, that's valid, but I don't think that's what John is getting at. Well, maybe he is. Vipers are predators and dangerous if you're not paying attention to them. So, maybe.

But, the important thing here is life and death. Good fruit brings life and bad fruit, the fruit of vipers, brings poison and death.

And here is the thing I like about Luke. In Matthew it is only the Pharisees and Sadducees who are a brood of vipers. In Luke, brood of vipers applies to everyone.

The whole crowd who shows up is a brood of vipers, and in Luke, it doesn't sound as if the Sadducees and Pharisees have even bothered to show up to be called a brood of vipers. So, in Luke, the brood of vipers, or fruit of vipers, is actually everyone who shows up to meet John at the Jordan River.

I guess that makes all of us a brood of vipers too. So, Happy Advent you brood of vipers! Good job on just showing up this morning.

Now, we could take being called a brood of vipers or fruit of vipers in a bad way and be offended, but I think there is something important going on here in that the whole crowd is being called a brood of vipers and not just certain enemies of the church.

Because it's only when we acknowledge that we are a brood of vipers that we can do anything about it. We can't repent unless we recognize our shortcomings.

Sometimes we are poison. It's true. Sometimes we bring death instead of life. It happens. I mean - how many times have you turned away from someone in need, or refused to share a gift because the other person isn't worthy?

It happens. We all do it. This is why we have confession and forgiveness. We all fall short. That's why we need a Savior, because we are fruit of the viper, but we aren't left there just dripping in venom.

When we acknowledge we are bad fruit, God transforms us into good fruit. So, unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, we show up, looking for something different, looking to be different.

When we hear the truth and acknowledge that we are fruit of vipers, we are repenting and turning back to God, asking God to forgive us and to make us the good fruit God has created us to be.

And the good news is that God doesn't turn us or anyone away. Just look at the two specific groups of people in the crowd that John calls a brood of vipers.

In the crowd, the big crowd, we find tax collectors and soldiers. Tax collectors and soldiers – the lowest of the low – they were Jews who were despised by other Jews as being traitors, because they worked for the Romans, and they had a reputation for being oppressors themselves.

It was bad enough that the Romans were oppressing them, but to have their own people oppressing them as well? Well... that's the lowest of the low. But, John doesn't turn them away. They have turned to God and anyone who turns to God will never be turned away.

The Jewish tax collectors and soldiers were like the vipers who strike because they are hungry and in self-defense. I mean really – is there a worse place to be than between your own people and the oppressor. They were the sandwich filling that was getting squeezed by both sides, but that didn't mean they couldn't do their job with dignity. And because they are part of the crowd it means they are no worse than anyone else.

So the crowd is told to share life with others. People are cold. That brings death. If you have an extra coat, share it with them so that they can live. Pretty simple.

Tax collectors are to only collect what has to be collected and no more. Don't kill anyone by forcing them to give beyond what they need just to survive.

Soldiers are not to use their power in order to get more than they deserve, because that kills people and it lowers their will to live.

Just because they are living under the Romans doesn't mean they have to become snakes. You can live with dignity even under occupation. And when we remember that God's call to Abraham and his descendants was to make God known in the world, it means that we don't stop being good fruit just because times are hard. We don't stop being good fruit just because we are surrounded by snakes.

I think all of us can understand that, right? I mean, how often do we say – well they did it first. They treated me poorly so I'm going to treat them poorly in return. When that happens, we are a brood of vipers, because we are not mirrors of God, but mirrors of the snakes who surround us.

When we turn our faces to God, our faces reflect God. That's repentance. That's saying we want the world to be different. That's us recognizing that God's ways are not human ways. Jesus, after all, dies on the cross and kills no one. He is the good fruit that brings life, even though he was killed by vipers.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. The darkness did not overcome it.

Light is stronger than darkness. That's what we proclaim in Advent. As the days get shorter and the nights longer and darker, we proclaim that light is stronger – life is stronger than death.

And so we do our best to be good fruit and when we are fruit of the viper, we turn back to God and repent, knowing that God will blow away our sin and gather our good works into his store house.

As John says, Jesus is the winnower. Jesus strips us of our sin, the chaff, and only remembers the good grain. And destroyed by fire, our sin is gone forever.

There is some really cool imagery going on here in the second part of the gospel. The Holy Spirit is wind or breath. On the threshing floor, grain is thrown up into the air where wind blows through the grain and sends the outer casing flying. The casing, the chaff, hits the far wall where it is gathered to be burned, but the heart of the grain falls straight down at the winnower's feet, where the winnower can gather it and use it to bring life to the world.

From the collection of the hearts of grain, bread is made to bring life to the world. Through the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of our sins, we are the grain, and together we are made bread for the life of the world.

Each little grain is good fruit.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we are reminded that we are forgiven and we are made one with Christ so that we can be good fruit in the world. You are what you eat and in Holy Communion we become one with Christ.

So, yes, being called a brood of vipers is actually good news, because it reminds us that we need a Savior, and we have a Savior – Jesus Christ our Lord. He comes for all of us no matter who we are and he alone makes us good fruit for the sake of the world.

And so like Abraham, we are sent into the world to make God known. Even in the midst of vipers, we are still good fruit. In the midst of death, we can still bring life. That's what Jesus did – he was crucified, died, and was buried, and on the third day he rose again.

Life in the midst of death. Good fruit in the midst of vipers.

We proclaim that good news today through our own words and actions. Words and actions that are led by Christ through the Holy Spirit who guides us.

During Advent, we remember that we are sinners in need of a Savior, we are fruit of vipers. We also remember that Jesus Christ our Savior was, is, and will always be with us eternally transforming us into his good fruit for the sake of the world, because the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.