Sermon on Advent 3

There’s a cottage industry around crafting opening sentences for a novel; the thinking being that if you pen a sufficiently engaging bit of prose you’ll have your audience for about a 100 pages or so and by then the logic or pull of the story itself will do the rest of the work.

Famous examples abound from the proverbial “it was a dark and story night” to the opening of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Sermons too, have their opening lines that are supposed to engage our attention, usually tied to an opening illustration like this one. Sometimes I’ll try for something dramatic but I don’t usually; it just feels, well, too dramatic.

If I was to pick my favourite opening line for a sermon, ever, it comes from the lips of John the Baptist in today’s gospel; a gospel, ironically paired with this Sunday’s theme, Joy, a theme carried by our first and second readings.

One can imagine the scene, scores of people standing beside the Jordan river; many having walked the approximately 20 miles from Jerusalem, which itself speaks to the intense interest that the population has developed in this enigmatic figure

The crowd tenses waiting for something: words of welcome, maybe even some encouragement, “well done, you’ve come all this way, don’t worry you won’t be disappointed.”

But instead they get, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.”

There’s probably no line in either the first or second testament that more ably fulfills the stereotypes of preachers floating about in our cultural imagination.

Humanity is evil; God is wrathful.

But as soon as we put it that starkly we know it can’t be right because the results of John’s ministry, the attitude of the people and the promises offered speak of another reality entirely.

Here’s a place where scholarship is our friend for in the eons of human time that have passed between these events and ours, there’s a lot not obvious to us in the way it would have been.

There *is* an element of shock and awe in John’s language that fulfills a Jewish crowds’ expectation of a prophet; prophets didn’t say, “well, let’s all gather round; Early Grey anyone?” Prophets thundered, prophets exuded passion for justice and rightness; they were not afraid to speak truth to power, look strange, or be offensive.

It would be hard for me to preside at Eucharist in a church building without my collar and my garb; it would be hard to be taken seriously, by Anglicans at least.

John, too has to wear “his collar;” without these kinds of words he wouldn’t have been taken seriously.

At the same time, John’s words of judgement are not taken judgementally. This is one of the hardest things for us to understand in a culture where we are turned off if the priest, pastor, judge or politician expresses the least bit of disdain for an action of a parishioner, a defendant, for a member of “joe public.”

For those of us that have played college sports or been in the military or were raised by a father born before 1940, it’s not quite so difficult to understand; sometimes a father, the coach or the commanding officer must say harsh things in harsh ways and the players and soldiers, hopefully the children, are ultimately grateful for truth laid out, no punches pulled.

I’m not talking about abuse which still is, unfortunately as rampant as ever; I’m talking about a culture-wide style of gruff talk that is no longer a societal expectation.

So there’s that, but there’s also this: words don’t always mean what we think they mean at first blush. “Brood of vipers” is a great example. This Shakespearean phrasing is famous and various Bibles, including our modern NRSV, don’t want to mess with a famous line even though a more literal translation like “children of snakes” is closer to the truth.

When it’s translating more literally and less poetically it becomes clearer; sure, snakes were not the creature with the best press in Jewish society, but notice that John doesn’t just call them snakes but a brood of snakes, thereby highlighting the social behaviour of the group: snakes stick together, gathering under a rock to keep themselves cool in the desert heat or to stay warm when night falls.

John is highlighting the herd or should I say, brood, mentality of the crowds that seeks comfort and identity in all having the same ethnic background, or now, through John’s ministry, the same religious experience.

I’m reminded of that scene in *Life of Brian* where Brian addresses the crowd and tells them they don’t need to follow him, they’re all individuals and they answer back in one perfectly coordinated voice, “yes, we are all individuals.”

Unlike Brian’s attempt with the crowd, John actually connects with them and they ask “What then should we do?”

In answer we see that John too, has not taken his own prophetic words as words of damnation, but words that speak of his intense interest and knowledge of who stands before him.

He addresses the crowd and the power groups within it, the tax collectors and the soldiers with equanimity and in terms understandable from Moses’ law.

Each of the actions he commends: share your clothing, don’t gouge, don’t extort is understandable for each group he addresses, as an appropriate application of the 10th commandment, “do not covet,” which in itself is a kind of summary of ethical behavior that leads to a just society.

John sees what is possible: a society of genuine justice and rightness, where equality are more than words but actions.

By seeing this, by commanding it, he expresses a deep hope; humanity is not hopelessly consigned to selfishness, to herding about in ignorance, susceptible to the latest political tyrant or religious fad.

We are free moral agents with the capability of conforming to God’s vision for justice.

He believes that the Law of Moses is a great gift, that soldiers can be protectors; that bureaucrats can help distribute goods for the sake of the society and that people generally can help one another in such a way that all can be respecters and protectors of our neighbours. It’s an optimistic vision.

He sees what is and calls for repentance because it’s not what could be

Can any preacher do better? It is my prayer that my words, that our words to each other, might elicit the question: what can I do? And that together we’d be able to call each other as individuals, as persons towards justice grounded in love.

I’m well aware that to do so is the mark of a mature parish; if we want to get there together we’re going to have to take the risk of truthfulness that John the Baptist models for us.

But there’s a necessary second part to John’s message; yes, John believes they are capable of great things, but the crowds already intuit that though they can do it, they can’t do it alone!

So they know, John knows and we know that everyone needs help. The crowd wonder, is John the one to help? Is he the ultimate helper, the Messiah?

At this point John had them in the palm of his hand; he could have claimed this authority and the people would have followed him. But John is enthralled not with himself and his prophetic call, but with God.

And so he points away from himself. He is the bearer of Good News, not the news himself.

Think about it this way, the gift of help will be God’s very Spirit, Gods very animating power. When you immerse your body baptism, that watery chaos from which God created you anew, you’re immersing yourself into the One who brooded over the original chaos and formed from it all we live in.

Now, immersed into that power, is it too much to believe that we will be able to create a society of justice and rightness?

That’s the picture John leaves us with, a picture that comes true when the Messiah comes.

The good news is that we will no longer be known as people who simply conform to the selfishness around us or that is in us, but filled with Messiah’s Spirit we become an extension of Messiah, we become God’s body.

Now as Christ’s body we can become the body politic with civic purpose, a strong calling in a society that believes the only way it can work properly is by systematically coveting what others have!

Working with God’s Spirit we can give to one another, to God’s work: with our time, our treasure and our talents. It’s not a burden but a joy, something we want to do.

John’s optimism is not empty, he has implicitly pointed to a real and greater Freedom. The presence of the Holy Spirit means, not that you and I follow the letter of the law, that we say: oh, I’ve got four coats I better give two away. It may mean that, but that’s only one possibility amongst a myriad; where the Holy Spirit is there are untold possibilities;

The Holy Spirit will lead you into an appropriate giving that builds the work of the kingdom here at St. Matthew or wherever God leads you that looks somewhat different than what’s described here.

Joyfully free persons immersed in Messiah’s Spirit helping enact a just society in which far more good things are possible than people generally imagine: now there’s a great opening line for the story of our lives yet to be written. Amen.