

John clearly needs a few lessons in how to grow a huge following. He'd never have a successful mega-church today when he starts out with lines like this: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

That's supposed to be good news?

You wouldn't actually think anyone would find themselves drawn to a preacher who called them snakes. If you remember from our series on serpents and dragons in the bible, you'll remember their connection to Satan.

If you Google brood of vipers, you'll get lots of hits referring to Matthew's version of John's story. There, John called the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers. Here, it seems to be the whole crowd.

But nobody seems mad. Instead of turning away, angry, the crowd stays to listen. Something keeps them there, hanging on to John's words. What is it?

Well, let's look at what they may know about John. At least some of them may know the story of John's birth. Maybe some of them were maybe even at the celebration and heard Zechariah's song.

Then, if they had heard that the word of God came to John in the wilderness, they would immediately recognize the call of a prophet. There hadn't been a prophet in Israel in 400 years. Prophets were God's messengers.

The people gathered there on the river bank had longed for a word from God for so long. They knew the prophets didn't always tell people what they wanted to hear. In fact, brood of vipers is kind of tame compared to some of those earlier prophets.

What prophets did was tell people what they needed to hear. And that word from the prophets was always both the news of harsh judgment and the news of compassionate salvation. The earlier prophetic word culminated during the exile and just beyond.

The last prophetic words Israel had heard proclaimed the good news of a coming Messiah. They were eagerly awaiting that Messiah. But that had been 400 years ago. Since then, nothing, except a false messiah or two.

So yeah, absolutely they stayed. This new prophet on the scene fit the mold of Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other prophets. That meant God still heard their cries.

This guy might actually be the sign God's action to save them was starting. Things were going to change and the anticipation of God's salvation kept them there. Even if they didn't love what John said 100%. In fact, some wondered if John was actually the Messiah himself.

But that's not his job. His job is to prepare the way. And that, for John, means repentance. Receiving forgiveness. And then changing behavior.

The passage John quoted from Isaiah comes from near the end of the exile. It assures a people in bondage in Babylon that freedom is coming...the way of the Lord will be their way home.

But Isaiah is pretty silent on what it means to prepare the way.

John is not. He warns of the coming judgment. He tells them that his is a baptism that is a marker of repentance. That's how you prepare the way...by repenting.

But what does that repentance look like? What then should we do they ask?

John doesn't tell them they should pray more or read scripture more. He doesn't tell them any elaborate rituals they should do or pilgrimages they should make. He doesn't tell them what they should believe.

He tells them the same thing the prophets 400 years before him said...repentance means changing the way their society works.

Jewish people were never that much about individual sin. It was about communal sin and communal shalom. The Jewish community was to be marked by a sharing of possessions so that all had what they needed. It was about those in power not abusing that power to extort people.

It was about earning only what was just and not letting greed dictate.

But, how is this good news for everyone? Obviously, it's good news for the ones who have no coat and the ones who have fallen victim to the greed and exploitation of tax collectors and soldiers.

But what about tax collectors and soldiers? What about the powerful?

The good news for those who have created this unjust society is that repentance will lead to forgiveness. Their past actions do not have to dictate their future in God's coming reign. All have the chance to be a part of that kingdom.

The one coming after John will have the power to bring all the world to the threshing floor. It will take later understandings for us to realize this won't be so much about certain people who are wheat and others who are chaff.

As understanding of what Jesus was really about grew, the understanding grew that we all have chaff that needs to be burned away. But that realization comes later.

Here, John wants people to know that they have the opportunity to be wheat, by repenting and receiving forgiveness. And then working to create a more just society.

But that justice will meet opposition. Herod represents that opposition, just as his father, Herod the Great, did to the infant Jesus. And that opposition has dangerous consequences. John is imprisoned. We'll learn later in the book that Herod had him beheaded. See, those with power often do not really want true justice. They fear losing power too much.

It's not just for the sake of history that Luke bookends John's story with political rulers. Tiberius was a military genius – but exploitive taxes and forced conscription into his army were an everyday reality. Tiberius expanded the borders of the Roman Empire, and people living in the regions Tiberius subdued were often sold into slavery.

Like Herod, he was also a brutal killer of opponents. In fact, all three of the Roman authorities named have a reputation for brutality. There was not a Jewish king in Judea itself so the Chief Priests were ipso facto kings.

The more I learn, the less I realize I know about the chief priests. At best they were caught in a tough situation between the Jewish people and the Roman authorities. But they too often yielded to the influence of Roman authorities so they could keep the peace.

From the very beginning of Luke's gospel, the political scene plays a powerful role. And it sets up Rome and the Jewish authorities as an example of kingdoms opposed to the kingdom of God.

No doubt some in the crowds were ardently hoping that Herod and Pilate and maybe even the chief priest would be the chaff that gets burned up. Jewish revolutionaries, or zealots, may well have been in that crowd.

John builds the expectation that the wrath is coming...the winnower is standing, waiting to start burning. Is that judge on his way to get the fire going and start the revolution? Is the axe looming?

But the next image we get is not what John set us up to expect. Jesus, this supposed mighty winnower, humbly receives baptism. Students of the Bible have struggled with that ever since. Why did Jesus need baptism?

Luke actually downplays the actual baptism. What comes after are the main keys for Luke. After his baptism, instead of picking up his winnowing fork, Jesus kneels in prayer. Heaven opens and a dove comes down. A voice says You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am pleased.

It's not exactly the scene Johns set us up to expect. There's no axe or winnowing fork. Things might be changing, but it seems it's going to be different than people thought.

But then, maybe we shouldn't be surprised. Even before this, we heard Mary sing of a world that would be turned upside down.

Now, in a scene nobody expected, it begins.