

2024 Vipers or Philippians?

I'm sure, if you are like me, you have been called a lot of things in your life. Well you're about to get called something else today. John the Baptist comes and he says to "the crowds that came out to be baptized by him." Note that this is *not* what he says to the pharisees who are too proud to be baptized for repentance, as if they don't need it. No, no, this is what he says to the crowds coming in repentance, longing for God's forgiveness.

Would that be you? Or were your fingers crossed during the confession this morning? Do you long to fight against the sin in your life? Do you want to follow after the Word of God and its goodness for you? Do you wish to remember your baptism, that drowning, and rebirth? Then this is you, he speaks to. This is for you – "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

John doesn't seem very seeker friendly does he? Aren't you supposed to be "nice" and "welcoming" in the Church?

And then, perhaps with some whiplash in tow, I roughly transition to Philippians where Paul is thanking God for the faithful people of Philippi. His language overflows with joy in regard to their partnership in the Gospel, and their reception of God's grace. He loves them, he thinks they are beautiful children of God whom he holds in his heart!

And so I might ask you this morning, which are you? Are you a Viper or a Philippian? And now we start the games, the games where we look at our works and try to justify that mean thing we did or said, or that failure, and we try to think of all the ways we've supported the Gospel and the ministry, and we recall that no one really ever thanked me for it – thank you very much... Or we

play the game where we think we are an OK person, but know the right answer isn't to say we are better than anyone else...

But if I can put a pause to those games, I would draw your attention to a place where we can really have some fun: latin! Don't get too excited. It's a phrase you have maybe heard before, or not, that's OK. It is: Simul Justus Et Peccator. Luther's phrase to describe you: Christian, as Simul (at the same time) Justus (Just, or righteous) Et (and) Peccator (Sinner). At the same time just and sinner.

Are you a viper or a Philippian? You, Christian, are both.

You stand with the crowds on the shore of the Jordan who deserve, because of your sin, to be torn down by the law in it's rudeness and blunt force, who, instead of playing games to try and avoid blame or say we have some other way of being saved (like having Abraham as your father), you must let it hit you, let it hurt you, and confess that there are a whole bunch of snakes in you – and in me. And then, by God's grace and call, barge into those waters of repentance and let it burn as a refiner, let it scrub and chafe as fullers soap. You deserve that, you need that. John stands to warn you of wrath to come for your sin. Yes, you.

And yet you stand with the Philippians as children of God, who have gone through the waters of baptism, who have stood and confessed your sin, and have heard the good news of a Savior, the Gospel and grace of God shown in a Savior – the One who comes after John and would die in your place to take the wrath to come upon himself that his blood, a perfect sacrifice, would be charged to your account and pay your debt. Blood that washes you clean so that in the eyes of the Father you, yes you, are perfect. Spotless. And an heir of eternal life. Justified. That's you, yes you!

And so what do we do with this realization? That we are God's children, God be praised, but still with this sinful nature that clings so close? But perhaps I should rephrase it, not "what do we do? But perhaps what does God do? What does he give folks like us? Saints and snakes?

For that snake in you. He continues to give us law, his Word of Truth and goodness and correction, to guide and rebuke and call us back. Yes, even the Philippians get this, as Paul gives them further instruction and prays that their "love may abound more and more, with knowledge and discernment." Which, small rabbit hole – means that true love is not only limited to affirming someone. Love is not just our feelings and "follow your heart." Love is guided by "knowledge and discernment, and approves what is excellent." Which means that when God sends John to call us a brood of vipers, that is his loving work. That we may discern what is right, what is wrong, and turn. God be praised for his Law that he sends to us. Easy to say now, not as much when it convicts that pet sin of ours – but true nonetheless. And so God gives us his Law, he gives us repentance, he gives us confession, and, lets not forget, he is patient towards us.

In our Old Testament Malachi prophecies John will come and the Lord will come with judgment, judgment that God's people rightly deserve for their sin, just as we do. And verse 6 at the end, did you see this? He says "For I the Lord do not Change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed." He is not withholding judgment because God's people are so good, he is withholding judgment because HE is so good, and is faithful to his promises.

This is not an excuse for us to delay in repentance, no, because we don't know how many days he gives us here. None of us do. This is a sign of his mercy. And his longing for all to turn and come to a knowledge of the truth. This is a sign of his heart for his people and how he will keep his promises, even as he has promised the Savior, Jesus, has come for us.

Which then perhaps brings us back on track. If God continues to give us the law because of the vipers in us, what does he offer people like us who confess our sin and long for his grace? Well, he gives us just that! Grace!

And it couldn't be any other way, could it? How do vipers become Philippians? If not by the grace and work of God? Our reading today starts with that, just as most sermons do, perhaps we treat it as a tag line, perhaps we gloss over it. The very first word, the first action, "Grace.... To you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

And we find further down in the text, that it is the Lord who began this good work in you. What good work is that? What turns vipers into Philippians? Sinners to saints? God's good work. The work of repentance. Or did the people go to see John because they had more moral fiber than others? Or had God the Holy Spirit worked in them to see their sin, and to bring them to the prophet, the prophet who would point them to the Savior, Jesus. Even more, Paul, doesn't miss the fact that he is no different than the Philippians or us. He says in our text, "you are partakers *with me* of grace." Which means he needed it too.

What turned him from a pharisee, a persecutor, a snake, to an apostle? God's work on a road to Damascus. God's work in baptism performed by Ananias. God's Work in the Word which he studied. And if those gifts and promises are for Paul, the chief of sinners, why wouldn't they be for you?

Which again means we are freed from the games. Who am I today? A viper or a saint? You are a baptized child of God, who has a sinful nature, but rest assured God has given you, a sinner saint, everything you need. Law to guide and curb and convict, gospel good news of a Savior to set you free.

A Savior who is no stranger to struggle. He has been tempted in every respect as you have, but did what we cannot, overcame it. A Savior who spoke the truth, the loving thing to do, but was hated for it. A Savior who knows betrayal and pain. A Savior who didn't deserve the wrath to come, but willingly took our place on a cross. To do what? As prophesied, to crush the serpents head, even as it bruised his heel. So he died, and was put in a tomb, but as we rejoice, the darkness could not hold him and he is Risen victorious. And this work, yes, this work of love and grace, to die and take our punishment was done for you. He has promised it in his Word, that it is for the world, so of course it's yours. And should you still doubt, in water, he gives a promise that you are united with a death like his, you will be united in a resurrection like his. In bread and wine a promise that this work on the cross was yours, you partake of it for your forgiveness. This is God's grace, not just a feeling or a well-wish. But real action in history on a cross, in a tomb, and given through water and word.

All so you may know that the sinful nature in you, the viper, one day it will die and it won't get back up, but you will. He has promised it. He has worked for it. He is faithful so that you are not consumed, nor will you be. But you will stand in the judgment as a Saint, Justus but not peccator. And that will be a day to praise the Lord for the good work he completed.

Until then may we fight the good fight, may we confess our brokenness and receive God's gifts of mercy and promise. Trusting that he, he will equip us sinner saints with what we need to fight the good fight, and he, never leaving or forsaking us, will see us safe through the battles. Even as he has already overcome all things for us in Christ. God be praised. Amen.