“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

Yes, John the Baptist was definitely someone who could stir up the crowds with the old fire and brimstone. His message was consistently one of dire warnings and repentance. And he baptized many as a sign of that repentance leading to a new and changed life. But in doing so he became completely at odds with the Temple in Jerusalem. This is because, in those days, the leaders of the Temple saw themselves as the sole arbiters of righteousness and repentance…but not without a price. And their actions were never really meant to “free” anyone from the wrath of God for the long term. It was assumed that God’s good will—or wrath—was based on a person’s righteousness, and this had to be regularly renewed or reinstated by the Temple…again, at a price. The religion of the Temple was what today we would call transactional. That is, to them God always wanted something in return. No free lunch.

Everything was quid pro quo. And consequently the Temple authorities were getting wealthier each time that price was paid, whether it came from the money changers, those selling animals for sacrifice, or paid directly to the Temple as a tithe. No wonder John thought of some of those who came to him for Baptism as a “brood of vipers.”

But we’re here in Advent, the season in which we prepare—with hopeful hearts—for something radically new, something that will, we also hope, change our lives forever, and in very positive ways. But much of what John is focusing is on might make anyone wonder whether we’re awaiting Christmas…or Judgment Day. Well, Advent is also a season for reflection, so let’s reflect on that for a moment.

It seems to be something that has followed human evolution; that we understand the limitations of our own power over a large and often dangerous world. And so we’ve sought throughout the ages to communicate with spiritual forces that may really control the things we can’t. This has taken many different forms over the eons, but humankind has, it would seem, also developed a basic understanding that there must be a price to pay to those in control. It’s a basic assumption that if there’s no payment, no sacrifice, things can turn ugly. Each age, each religion has had its own sets of rules and sacrifices in order to stay on the right side of many gods…or one. But is that what John was really after? Are we waiting for yet another demanding, capricious, and transactional deity to subjugate us? No! And today’s Gospel illustrates how much John was fed up with that kind of religion. He’d long ago turned his back on the religion of the Temple. Now, in order that those who come to him can truly change their lives once and for all, he’s baptizing, freeing people, in God’s name, from their burden of sin, asking nothing in return. He tells those who have come to him that, once baptized, they should “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

Thus he is setting the stage for a new, more radical kind of change, the kind of change Jesus will call us into. Don’t look to the past, to Abraham and his kind for guidance. A new, freely chosen and non-transactional way is called for. That is, acting out of righteousness has as its goal nothing but the wellbeing of all. “What then should we do?” they ask. John lays out simple guidelines for them. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To the tax collectors, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

To the soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Okay, what’s really going on here? Think about it. And note that this passage is here, in Advent and at this time not because it sounds “nice,” but because it is essential to understanding what’s about to happen when Jesus arrives. Understanding Jesus coming into our world requires, at some level, that we understand what John was saying.

So let’s think about that “radical” part. What is John really saying about how we should live our lives to prepare for the coming of Jesus? It is, quite simply, that what John is telling the people to do—to be “worthy of repentance”—has, at the heart of it, everything to do with how they take care of one another, but, surprisingly, nothing really to do with religion. In other words, it is both personal and spiritual, but not religious. Sinfulness, in John’s mind, seems to be wrapped up in a way of life that lets some prosper at the expense of others. Repentance here is just another word for radical change in how we treat one another. And John is telling the crowds that we should not merely be spiritually changed by Jesus, but also to change our world and the lives of everyone around us because it is, simply, the righteous thing to do. This all connects back to the Great Commandments, the basic
definition of righteousness: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength…and your neighbor as yourself. Religion, you may note, has no direct part to play in this, but righteousness does, the kind of righteousness John is referring to. And this is what John is getting at and what got him—and Jesus—in so much trouble: the kind of righteousness he and Jesus teach does not replace their religion, but it transcends it, making it not part of something hierarchical…but making it something universal. Wow. Now this really does become radical. In those days religion—especially state religion—controlled nearly everything in life. And then all of a sudden, here comes a scruffy, over-the-top outspoken and charismatic fellow who is trying to turn all of this on its head. He has made righteousness intensely personal, but with the understanding that it is each person who is responsible for the wellbeing of others. For so long people have pondered and prayed about what God wants…when the answer is so simple, and God simply looks for us to affirm that this is what we want, too.

Now there’s another little bit of history that fits in right about here. For the first few centuries after Jesus, those who followed him and tried to live according to his teachings did not aspire to call what they did a “religion,” but rather a “way,” a path, a course to follow through life. The Romans noted this and wrote about it, but seemed rather confused. In Rome, as in most other places, religion governed much of daily life and was the basis for laws and moral behavior. It really wasn’t until the fourth century that the Emperor Constantine made this growing Christian “way” his state “religion.” Now doing so might have made it less life-threatening to be a follower of Jesus, but the result also blended in the Roman fear-based rules and penalties that came with all state religions. And so the centuries have churned on, bringing us today to yet another Advent, preparing once again for another celebration of that person, that phenomenon that came into our world to lead us, not so much to some distant and demanding God…but as to turn to and care for one another; right here, right now. That is, to lead us to righteousness.

We hear, see, and spiritually experience these facts not only every Sunday, but also every time we choose to act as John—or Jesus—would have us act. As I have said before, the bread we share really does symbolically represent the body, the identity and purpose of Jesus. Sharing it we willingly take up Jesus’s mantle and agree to carry on his work as our own. The wine we share we share as the symbol that we—we ALL—communally free ourselves and one another from the power that others would have over us, the power of others judging us as sinners—or whatever is deemed unrighteous by them—and that all are cleansed and renewed and fully empowered to act as individuals. Thus we are all free people on a mission. We are all free people following a common path, a common and universal “way.”

Advent is quickly passing us by. Very soon we’ll be standing on the verge of that moment of change, waiting for something new, for something beyond merely hopeful. We’ll be at Christmas. And thus, since we’re going to be exchanging presents very soon, I’d like to offer one more unexpected one, one that you’ve already received, though you may not realize it. It doesn’t need wrapping, and it isn’t meant to be hidden away until Christmas morning. It may also be a gift that you might even receive cautiously or even unwillingly…but that’s also just its nature. It is, however, the gift that, I believe at any rate, John was hinting at and for which Jesus died so that we’d cherish it. Let me ask you to, if possible, look at your hands. Go ahead, hold them just high enough so you can see them in front of your face. Now look at them. No matter what shape they are in, think about how wonderful and human they are, and all that they are capable of. The gift you have been given is not just those hands, but also the world that Jesus places into them to protect and to nurture. The lives and souls that Jesus comes into our world at Christmas to place into them, again, to protect and to nurture. A loving God asks for nothing other than that we live as though Jesus’ purpose in life—and death—is our own. Think about this every time you look at your hands, every time you feel unsure about your own purpose in life. Jesus comes to tell us that God is not transactional, but loving. It is a loving God that looks to your hands with hope: today, at Christmas, and every day. Jesus comes to show us a “way” that only demands of us…all that we must demand of ourselves. Quite a different gift, but perhaps one that, for the sake of this troubled world, is even more worth celebrating.