

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent

'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'

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This is somewhat of a strange saying, for John the Baptist is the person who *warned* the Pharisees and Sadducees, saying *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'*

Not only this, but it is written that these very same Pharisees and Sadducees are not coming judge John, but to be baptized by him.

Why, then, are they attacked, called a *brood of vipers*?

It is because they are a brood of vipers, just like you.

They, like all of us, are children of our father the devil, who as a serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the garden. What is a viper, but a snake? What is a brood, but offspring. You, dear Christians, began this life, as the brood of vipers, for vipers have in themselves venom, venom which kills, and all who are not cleansed by the washing of Christ bear within themselves such murderous poison, which will kill others, which will kill themselves, as it is written: *'you shall surely die.'* This is what it means to be the brood of vipers. To be a thing of death.

Yet the Pharisees and Sadducees are pointed out and heckled by the prophet. Insulted in a way not noted of anyone else. And why? The word Pharisee means *'the holy one.'* The word Sadducee means *'the righteous one.'* Are they accused by John because of their hypocrisy? Because they call themselves holy and righteous, when they are liars?

Yet they came to be baptized with water unto repentance. They wanted to repent. They knew they were sinners.

The Pharisees were indeed holy, for they set themselves apart from all others by keeping the letter of the law completely. And not only the letter, but the comma, the asterisk, and the foot note. Far from flirting with violating the law of Moses, they kept far from violating what might be seen as approaching a violation of the law of Moses.

And the Sadducees were indeed righteous, insofar as they kept all the ritual commands set down by God in the Torah, and, through every misery, every persecution, kept the worship of the one true God continuing in the Temple.

Why, then, are they accused? It is simple.

They are accused that we all may be accused. If the most holy, the most righteous among us are the children of Satan, a *brood of vipers*, then *O Lord, who can stand?* We tend to stand in judgment against the Pharisees and Sadducees because Christ did. But we are not Christ. We are but fallen men. He judged the best of mankind. Now how will He judge the worst of mankind, that is, how will He judge us?

'Even now, the axe is laid to the root.' Even now, Adam is being judged, the root of the tree of humanity.

For the Son is coming.

The fact that the Son is coming is not good news, at least, not of itself. Who knows if the Son is coming in mercy or in vengeance, and who are we to pretend that we know? Have we not all done enough evil to condemn our own lives, and if not just our own, but the lives of the world itself?

Once, God said *'I repent that I made man.'* Do you think that we have become so much more holy that God would not think the same again?

The Son is coming, and it may be that, far from coming to redeem us, He may come because *he repents that he made man.*

The Pharisees and Sadducees are right to seek the baptism of John, the baptism of repentance. For there is much to repent of, and much to be afraid of. And if they are afraid, why are you not afraid? Afraid of *the wrath to come?*

But John does not turn away this *brood of vipers*. Though he lashes out *'who*

warned you,' yet he says 'I baptize with water unto repentance. But He will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit.' Fire, which overturned Sodom and Gomorrah. The Spirit, which hovered over the waters on the first day.

Does John warn us of the fire to come? Does He comfort us with the promise of a new birth?

The Christ child will answer these questions. The Christ who now is fed within the womb of Mary, the Mother of God. The virgin, who *magnifies the Lord*.

Surely, *this child 'shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth. And with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.'*

But you, who were once a *brood of vipers*.

You, who are now children of God, reborn of water and the word. You, O little children, remember what is written:

'The child shall play over the den of the cobra.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Isaiah

11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.