

## From Brooding Vipers To The Peaceable Kingdom

Today's readings begin with a beautiful vision of the peaceable kingdom.

A time when all of creation will be happy with each other.

As man-eating lions turn to dining on straw, while poisonous snakes become the playthings of children.

The peaceable kingdom is a beautiful place, but it's not easy to reach.

Which is why we have today's gospel lesson.

Because today's gospel lesson helps us come to see the path, the doorway, to that beautiful place.

It's not an easy road.

In fact, it can be downright painful.

Painful, because it means facing who we are in a very deep and profound way – before we can become who we are meant to be.

John the Baptist, dressed in skins and eating locusts, begins with a demand for brutal honesty.

And he makes that demand on everybody, in no uncertain terms.

He makes this demand on the rich, who are represented by the Sadducees.

And he makes this demand on the middle class, who are represented by the Pharisees.

He makes it on everyone.

And let's be brutally honest.

Honesty with oneself — is brutal!

To face my defects of character, to look unflinchingly at those parts of myself that I hate, it's tough to do.

How do I know what I need to change in myself?

Actually, that's the easy part!

All I have to do is look at what upsets me about other people.

The stuff that drives me nuts about you — is the stuff I very often need to change about me!

Which is why when Luke tells this same story in his gospel, all kinds of people from all levels of society are asking John what they must do.

And John gives each one of them a piece of advice.

But all of that advice boils down to just one thing.

Become brutally honest with yourself.

Do the thing that too many people spend their lifetimes avoiding.

Take a hard look at the good, the bad and the ugly, and then put all of it at the feet of God.

Ask for the grace of gratitude for the good.

Ask for the grace of forgiveness, and the courage to change, for the bad and the ugly.

This confrontation with self is the first necessary step if we are to grow into kingdom people.

Kingdom people are those who develop the ability to welcome everyone to the table.

Kingdom people are those who come to realize that everyone is a necessary part of God's dream for humanity.

It's the story a young Catholic Worker learned when:

"One afternoon, after several of us had struggles with a 'wino,' a 'Bowery bum,' an angry, cursing, truculent man of fifty or so, with long gray hair, a full, scraggly beard, a huge scar on his right cheek, a mouth with virtually no teeth, and bloodshot eyes, one of which had a terrible tic, as an elderly Dorothy Day says,

'For all we know, he might be God himself come here to test us.

So let's treat him as an honored guest.

See in his face the most beautiful face we can imagine.'" R. Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, modified.

Only by breaking out of our own shells of biases and bigotries, of prejudices and fears, can we then slowly learn to encounter this world, and each other, with the eyes of wonder and awe.

Only then can we begin to see in each other, not members of different tribes, nations or political persuasions, but rather, we can get that glimpse of what Thomas Merton saw as he stood at the street corner of Fourth and Walnut in Lexington, Kentucky:

When he is suddenly seized by the realization that everyone he sees is part of himself, that we all of us, completely and totally, belong to one another.

He's so moved by this realization that he nearly laughs out loud!

He ends this wonderful epiphany by asking:

"What would people say if they knew that they are all walking around, shining like the sun?!"

Martin Luther King, Jr. struggled with these same questions as he faced radical segregationists in our nation in the 1950's and 60's.

"I have begun to realize how hard it is for a lot of people to go on living without having someone to really look down upon," he explained.

"It's not just that they'll feel cheated out of someone to hate, it's that they'll be compelled to look more closely at themselves.

At what they don't like in themselves.

My heart goes out to people I hear called 'rednecks.'

They have little, if anything.

And hate is a possession they can still call upon reliably, because it works for them.

I have less charity in my heart for well-to-do and well educated people – for their snide comments, and their cleverly rationalized views.

For the way they mobilize their political and even moral justifications to suit their own purposes.

No one calls them into account.

The Ku Klux Klan is their whipping boy.

Someday all of us will see that when we start going after a race or a religion, a type, a region, a section of the Lord's humanity – then we're cutting into Our Lord's heart, and we're bleeding badly ourselves." R. Cole, Simone Weil, *A Modern Pilgrimage*, modified.

Developing a sense of respect and caring isn't just for our fellow humans.

There was a wonderful piece in the New York Times last week about "Sabrina Imbler, a science writer, who noticed how often newly discovered creatures are described as 'alien' and how often critters that seem very different from humans – a blue sea blob, a transparent-faced barrel eye fish, a centipede with lots of little legs – are viewed with disgust.

'Instead of gawking at such creatures as bizarre, I find it more fulfilling to seek connection with them across – and because of – our differences,' Imbler writes.

This becomes an argument for conservation efforts big and small.

This kind of openness, the fruit of a radical self-examination, then grows into an openness not only toward our fellow human beings, but to all of life on this planet.

'If people care about the fate of the sea cucumber, they may act to protect the deep sea from the imminent threat of mining,' Imbler writes.

This rethinking might also result in smaller changes, like choosing not to squish that harmless house centipede in your bedroom.

[I know, that's a hard one!]

Ultimately, however, Imbler is not only arguing for appreciating the creatures of the deep or for better policies to protect them, but something more profound.

'I believe building these connections with strange, baffling or even disconcerting organisms is a practice of radical empathy you can try in your everyday life — offering openness, wonder and care toward other creatures' mysterious nature.

When you encounter a life-form so unfamiliar that you find it shocking or repulsive, look inside to find glimmers of understanding.

Or perhaps appreciation comes through your differences, such as the mystical ease with which a sea star regenerates an arm or an amoeba engulfs its prey.

Perhaps dwelling on these differences can incite wonder — a reminder of how many strange lives and ways of being there are on

this planet.” Alexandra Sifferlin, NYT 11/28/2022, quoting Sabrina Imerson, modified.

And here’s the thing.

It’s what John the Baptist is reminding us about this morning.

Of all the strange and curious things in this world, you and I are are the strangest and the most curious.

We are each of us made up of unimaginable depths.

We are each of us capable of creating unimaginable beauty.

We are each of us created to be kind, generous and useful to one another.

Honesty with self.

A willingness to change.

Such is the path to that beautiful place, where:

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lay down with the kid, and a little child shall lead them.”

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