

We have quite a lot in our gospel reading today. The whole reading is John addressing the crowds coming out to be baptized by him. Apparently they have heard him proclaiming a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” and here they’ve come. But John’s not satisfied.

“You brood of Vipers,” he calls them. Perhaps they see the coming wrath, but these folks are simply looking for a quick fix, to “cover their bases”. Repentance means nothing to them: They don’t see the need. “A splash of water and forgiveness? If you say so, John, but we don’t need ‘repentance’ - we are children of Abraham.” John sees the comfort they find in their membership, their affiliation, and he tells them “Your religion won’t save you.” The ax is lying at the foot of the tree, he tells them, and the trees not bearing good fruit are coming down.

Two things happen here. First, the people hear his warning and take it seriously - "What then should we do?" they ask. So John tells them, pointing them toward equity (if you have more than you need, give to those who don't have enough), fairness (don't take more than you should) and justice (don't use your power to profit; be satisfied with your wages). In other words, "Bear good fruit," he tells them, "fruit worthy of repentance."

But then, the crowd reaches for the quick fix again - they were "questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah," hoping that this one before them with the answers might be the one to save them. John says, "No. That one is coming, but don't get your hopes up. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor." The wheat he'll gather, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Our reading concludes, calling this message "good news."

Do you all know what a threshing floor is? Harvested wheat would be piled onto the threshing floor to separate the grain from the stalks. The farmer would beat it and the ripe grains would fall to the floor. Once that was done, the farmer might use a winnowing fork to get rid of the stalks and what remained - sometimes throwing them into the air. With enough wind, the stalks would blow away, leaving the heavy grains to fall and collect. Does that sound about right to those of you who know?

More importantly, does this image sound like good news to you? John makes (the one who's to come) sound like his purpose will be dividing the fruit from the chaff in society, dividing up people - the good from the bad, those who've borne fruit and those who have not. The ax is for the fruitless trees, the fire for the weightless chaff, and the one to come is only gathering the fruit.

I think John's strategy here probably produced some repentance in the crowd, and I imagine he meant these words just the way they sounded. But as well divided a world as the one he lived in, I doubt John could have guessed how divided the world would become. I can't imagine he knew how good we would get at dividing ourselves. The world today has just about perfected this work, separating the wheat from the chaff. So what is there left to say about this good news?

I'd invite you to think about wheat and chaff differently. The waning light of Advent certainly casts a different glow around them. I don't know about you, but as Advent has progressed I've been encountering the chaff that lives in me. What fruit there is needs dividing from the chaff. John's image is helpful to us in the remaining weeks of Advent because fruit and chaff exist within us all. They might go by different names but these terms are good ones, identifying what's essential, nourishing and good from what no longer serves a purpose. And there are plenty of both that we carry around with us, and not just during Advent.

I got back from Great Falls Wednesday evening. When I got to church to set up for our *Midweek* service, Lavonne was already here shoveling the leftover snow from Sunday. It wasn't grumpy shoveling either - she was her usual up-beat self, just doing what needed doing. The preparation and participation in our midweek services (especially the meals) has been tremendous. The generosity of time and care have made these services warm and lovely. The trust I feel at your willingness to try this new thing and the effort you've lent to the task of pulling off a meal and an unfamiliar service have deepened Advent for us all. These services are only one example of the good fruit Messiah bears in this time and place. Thanks be to God for all this very good fruit indeed.

Chaff might be less visible, but it's also important to name. It's the stuff in "the way" that frustrates fruits in all their forms. Besides being that which no longer serves a purpose, it piles in the corners and clings to us, making light loads heavy, and burdening our last steps through Advent.

The chaff of the crowd helps us see our own. Not unlike the crowd, we can find ourselves comfortable in the "quick fix" of our religious identity. We're on the winning team after all (Christianity) - what do we need repentance for? John sees this in them: "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." John says it plain - Our religion won't save us. Staying undisturbed and complacent in our affiliation is chaff. Perhaps this is one reason the Church catholic is in decline. Repentance might yet produce the fruit required, but do we have the desire or the imagination to go a different way?

The Holiday season holds a certain amount of chaff too. The consumerism of Christmas "the most wonderful time of the year" doesn't feel so wonderful some years. This can be a hard time, in part (I think) because of the "happiness" we're told we should be feeling. The sadness that creeps under the door this time of year doesn't get much airtime amid the consumerism frenzy, but it's there. Memories of happier Christmas' with loved ones, some of whom may no longer be with us, is only one reason Christmas can be a melancholy time. Feeling bad about not having the right holiday "cheer" is chaff.

And some of those holiday spirit "shoulds" come with us to church I think. We might feel some emotional dissonance singing Christmas Carols and hearing readings about waiting and darkness, but we push those feelings away - maybe we want to feel "Christmas-y". I think John would look at both of these conflicting directions and call them chaff.

Because there is something avoided by these feelings. It's something "at our center" that we can find ourselves aware of in church, especially at this time of year. It's a tender thing that, even though it wants to be known and brought to light, we seek to protect. The impulse to protect this tender place in us often causes us to hold the word of God (words that consistently poke at it) at an arm's length.

John's message to the crowds, while truly gruff, is a call for them to "drop that arm" - to stop keeping at bay what's trying to enter. Repent, we hear. Let in the solemn truth you're hearing, the truth that the one who is coming is coming for you. Let this truth touch that vulnerable tenderness. Let your gentleness be known.

As gruff as it is, John's message of repentance goes for that tender place - it goes for the heart. His message of God's forgiveness - that this forgiveness is yours - goes for the heart. God's coming to earth through poor parents as a vulnerable, refugee baby goes for the heart. That baby who will heal the sick, love the outcast, and welcome even us, with all our jagged edges and broken pieces, goes for the heart. That baby growing into the one who will be hated and violently killed to save us from ourselves goes for the heart.

So we hold these words and messages at an arm's length, protecting ourselves from feeling any of it too deeply, or having that tender spot revealed as the hunger we thinly veil. We hold at an arm's length this God who seeks us out, who comes to us, to give us God's very self for the sake of satisfying that hunger.

This arm's length religion is what John sees in the crowd submitting to his baptism, and he names it for what it is - chaff. It reminds me of some things Luther says in his Large Catechism regarding baptism. He describes at one point the Christian life as "nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after..." Repentance is key to baptism for Luther.

"What is repentance" he writes, "but an earnest attack on the old creature [put to death in baptism] and an entering into a new life? If you live in repentance, therefore, you are walking in baptism, which not only announces this new life but also produces, begins, and exercises it."

Desire for that new life of vulnerability, of gentleness, tenderness and ultimately the compassion and justice he describes is what John's repentance stokes in the crowd. I wonder if the crowd, hearing of this one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, heard the promise of one who will overcome every effort to keep him at bay.

It's in the absence of our pretense and protections (all that chaff that no longer serves, that the Holy one of Israel will be great in our midst. But if your pretense and protections are still feeling firm, that's ok. If the chaff is starting to block the doors and windows, don't worry. For the one who is to come will bring the unquenchable fire. Not doom but deliverance.

The Holy Spirit with words of promise and fire will clear the floor at our feet, opening the way that we might receive the truth for which we have waited. Before our eyes, all that keeps us from entering IN to the wonder and mystery of what's to come will be gathered, burned up and blown away. My prayer for you is that in that opening you hear the words, "Do not be afraid."

AMEN