

3 Advent, Celtic      Luke 3:7-18  
Christ and Grace      December 16, 2018  
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When we hear this passage in Advent, I think about how hard it is to hear these words, and I can understand why people who don't go to church much, or at all, say that they don't want to hear such fire and brimstone, that their lives are hard enough already. Can you even imagine getting a Christmas card with John the Baptist pictured on it and his words "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

According to Luke, great crowds streamed into the desert to get yelled at by John. Why were they so eager to hear his fire-and-brimstone preaching? As I pondered this last week, I came across a commentary by Debie Thomas that struck me. She focused on the question people asked John at the end of his sermon. "What should we do?" That's not a question people ask when things are going just fine. It's the question we ask when we're at the end of our rope, when the advice we've been given has failed, when our usual defenses are down, when our lives are falling apart. "What should we do?"

John's answer to this question was not what we might expect from this wild, confrontational, holy man. What kind of answer would you expect? Abandon your homes and families? Move to the desert? Reject today's culture? Start a revolution? But the answer John gave them was unexpected, and much less exciting: What should you do? You should go home.

Go home to your families and neighbors, your vocations and colleagues. Stop, turn, and try again. That's really what repentance means. Stop insisting that God is far away from the gritty reality of your particular life. Turn and inhabit your life as deeply and as generously as you can right now. Try again to share, be merciful, and do justice. Inhabit your life, no matter how plain, how unglamorous, how routine. Why? Because God is in the midst of all of it, and the holy ground that matters most is the ground beneath your feet.

And so, to the tax collectors, John says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the soldiers: "Don't unfairly extort money from people; be satisfied with your wages." And to everyone who has anything: "You have gifts to give. So stop hoarding. Stop procrastinating. Stop making excuses. The day of repentance is now." Stop, turn, and try again.

John concludes his sermon in the wilderness with a fearful sounding description of the coming Messiah: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

And we are back to this portrait of a Jesus who judges, divides, and burns us. I suspect this makes us uncomfortable because we don't understand the meaning of judgment. We tend to equate judgment with condemnation, but in fact, to judge something is to see it clearly — to know it as it truly is. Judgment can mean discernment, sharpness, and perception.

What if John is saying that the Christ who is coming to rule us really sees us? That he knows us at our very core? Maybe the winnowing fork is an instrument of perceptive love, patiently wielded by the One who discerns in us rich harvests still hidden by chaff. Maybe it's in offering every particular of our lives, giving God permission to "clear" us — to separate all that's destructive from all that is good, beautiful, and priceless.

Can we believe that God is not interested in destroying us, but in saving us; longing to remove from our lives and our hearts all that is harmfully consuming us? Isn't that the God we long for, and wait for – the God who rules in our hearts with love? John's exhortations can be good news when we need assurance that our life, our family, and our vocation is not beyond the reach of God's redemptive goodness.

John cries out to all who are in the wilderness - Your life is infinitely dear, and nothing in it is beyond redemption. Nothing. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Saving this poetry for future reference:

Don't be afraid. John isn't threatening you.  
He's setting you free,  
relieving you of the crap that messes you up.  
What are the rough places in you  
that need to be made smooth,  
the crooked places that need straightening out?  
Surrender them to God.  
What are the lies that clutter up your head,  
the fears that infect your heart?  
Let them be winnowed out and burned.  
And what are the gifts you don't share,  
the second coat you don't give away,  
the despair you try to sell, overpriced?  
Let God gently take them from your hands.  
Christ comes with the music of love in his heart.  
Let go of that suit of armor, attached as you are to it.  
You can be free now. Throw it off, and dance.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Debie Thomas for inspiration and help with this sermon.  
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2030-what-then-should-we-do>

