

The Third Sunday in Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

You may recall the story of the minister who hired someone to paint his living room. When the painter finished, the minister found that the walls were streaked and blotchy because the painter had tried to save money by thinning the paint. The minister turned to the man and said, "Repaint, and thin no more!"

The Gospel for today, the third Sunday in Advent, tells the story of John the baptizer's encounter with the multitudes who came out to the wilderness to hear him. John the baptizer is a man of God who obviously speaks to *us* as part of the multitude. But John is also a man who serves as a role model for the church. John's role in relation to Jesus is in many ways what our role is to be in relation to our Lord. His message to the multitudes is a message for us, as well as a message we are to bear to others.

The first thing John tells the multitude is that they are like snakes crawling away from a forest fire. They are crawling toward the Jordan River to be baptized by John, thinking that somehow that baptism will save them in a magical way from the wrath of God's judgment. The multitudes, like snakes, are not concerned about love or peace or justice. They are concerned only about saving their own necks—and snakes, as anyone can plainly see, have a lot of neck to save. John's answer to them is that they are to bear fruits that befit repentance. They are to turn their lives around and go in a new direction. Baptism without repentance is of no avail. Baptism without commitment to a new style of life, a new approach to God and neighbor, a new decision to promote love and justice and peace is nothing more than an empty ritual. Baptism without discipline, as Dietrich Bonhöffer said, is cheap grace.

John goes on to warn them not to say to themselves, "We have Abraham as our father." The fact that you've got that old-time religion of Abraham or Augustine or Luther or Wesley does not in any way remove the demand that *your* life be renewed. The fact that your grandfather was a Lutheran minister does not relieve you of the need to receive communion. The fact that your great-aunt was a millionaire does not automatically entitle you to a bank loan without collateral. The fact that your forebears came to this land on the Mayflower does not excuse you from paying your own income tax each year. You see, your tradition may be ever so good and valuable, but unless you yourself claim it and embody it, it is wasted. Repentance is up to you. Nobody can repent for you, nor can you repent for anybody else. The change is yours. The newness of life is yours. The fruits of righteousness are yours to bear, regardless of what other people have done, are doing, or will do.

Well, being called snakes obviously got the people's attention, so they ask John what they are to do. What does the other side of repentance look like, in practical terms? And John answers them, "Whoever has two coats, share with someone who has none. Whoever has food, do likewise." Notice that John doesn't tell them to go join a religious community. He doesn't tell them to go read scripture. He doesn't tell them to go to seminary and become pastors. He simply says, "Share what you have with others." That's his instruction to the multitude, the great middle class of his time. That's what it means to "bear fruits that befit repentance," namely, "share what you have with others."

Then the tax collectors ask John, "What shall *we* do?" The tax collectors were the organized crime of that time. They made their wealth by extortion and fraud. Surely John will tell them to turn state's evidence and then seek totally new employment after, of course, writing a book about how they got saved. But no, John tells them simply, "Collect no more than you're supposed to." In other words, John tells them to keep their jobs and do what they are supposed to do, with fairness and honesty.

Finally, the soldiers ask John, "And we, what shall *we* do?" The soldiers of that time were often the thugs who protected the tax collectors and did their dirty work. Surely John will tell them to renounce their military way of life and join a peace movement. But instead John says, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." The phrase "to rob by violence" in the Greek text literally means "to shake down." Tie that in with "false accusations" and you get a pretty good picture of how

soldiers were expected to act in the time of John. But John doesn't tell them to stop being soldiers. He just tells them to stop shaking people down and instead be good soldiers who do what they are supposed to do.

Now in all of these questions and answers, it is clear that for John repentance is not primarily a pious act of getting saved, but rather a matter of ordinary, secular practicality. You want to turn around and get into a better relationship with God? Then practice righteousness right where you live your life. Whatever your job, whatever your station in life, whatever your assignment, just *do* it! And do it well, in all fairness and honesty. Make society work the way it's supposed to work. That's how to repent and bear good fruit. That's how to do the things that make for shalom, the well-being of civilization, justice and peace.

After a while, the people begin to wonder whether perhaps John the baptizer is the messiah. After all, he speaks with such conviction and authority. But John quickly points beyond himself to Jesus the Christ, who will carry what John is doing even further. The scepter of this Christ who is coming will be a winnowing fork. With that winnowing fork he will clear the threshing floor of the world of all the chaff and debris that clog things up and choke authentic life from occurring. The valuable wheat Christ will gather into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

When we hear these words, we often hear judgment, don't we? But is that really what John means? Does he mean that some of us are grain and others are chaff, and on the day of judgment our Lord will save some of us but consign the rest to the unquenchable fire of hell? That is certainly one interpretation, but it is not the only one.

What if John is not talking about separating *people*, but rather about separating characteristics *within* people? What if judgment day is not when good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell, but rather when that which is good and worthy in each of us is redeemed and that which is unworthy and wicked is extracted and thrown away?

Whether John has this in mind we cannot say for certain. But there is strong evidence that this is precisely the position held by our Lord Jesus Christ. Again and again Jesus insists on seeing what is good and worthy in all sorts and conditions of people, even those on whom society has turned its back as being hopeless and lost. Again and again Jesus proclaims good news to just those who are least worthy, deeming them to be creatures of God regardless of their present condition, and therefore beloved by God and redeemable. When Jesus tells people to cut off their right hand or pluck out their eye if these things are occasions for evil, is he not offering the hope that some day finally that which is wicked in us will be divided out from what is worthy?

Just imagine what it would be like if all the chaff in you could be separated out and carried away and destroyed. Just imagine what promise there would be in knowing that Christ is your judge, not to send you off to hell, but to relieve you of the miserable burden of your compulsions, your deceptions, your big lies and your little white lies, and to send all these things off to a place where they would no longer choke you and prevent you from having peace and well-being.

Too often judgment day is portrayed as God's effort to scare us into being good by threatening to punish us for being bad. But if judgment day is instead a portrayal of God's will that all the chaff be removed from our lives so that the wheat that is valuable will remain and be treasured forever, then judgment day is not to be dreaded but welcomed.

In this way the judgment day that awaits us becomes also the hope that empowers us for our daily living here and now. What will happen then happens now. The judgment we anticipate helps us make better judgments now, with confidence and with hope. It is not our fear of judgment that makes us repent, but rather it is the promise of judgment that gives us permission to repent and enter that sort of new life which constitutes nothing other than the Kingdom of God.

This is the message of hope John the baptizer delivered to the multitudes in his day. It is the same message of hope he delivers to us *this* day. And it is the message that we the Church, the Body of the Christ who has come and is coming, are to deliver to the world. It is a message not of condemnation, but of salvation.

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