

Year C, Advent 3
December 13th, 2015
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Luke 3:7-18

The Barn of Peace!

I wonder what kind of shovel John the Baptist thinks the Coming One will use to sift the wheat from the husks. I wouldn't think you would use a shovel at all since grain couldn't fall through it. I would think you would use a winnowing fork to throw the grain and debris up and let the wind blow the lite stuff away (in fact, other translations do use the term "winnowing fork")? On our farm we only used shovels to move the grain into the barn after it had been separated. Then we might burn the husks (chaff) if the wind wasn't too strong and the pile too close to a building.

I'm having trouble understanding what John is pointing to. He uses the wrong tool and wants to burn the husks in a fire that never goes out. Husks burn hot and fast and then they are gone. John seems to be enjoying his fire too much and wants it to last forever. It seems like we have a lot of people these days with an extreme fascination for fires that never go out.

I'm also having trouble with how angry John the Baptist sounds. This crowd gathers to be baptized and he says, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?" John attempts to fracture their complacency with rhetoric designed to shock. He believes the way people think and live exposes them to danger much closer than they know.

(As it turned out he was living 40 years ahead of the total destruction of Jerusalem. I think he sensed it coming and tried to prevent it but knew no way other than the threat of good violence, that he saw coming from God, as a way of frightening people to think and live differently and so prevent the coming total destruction. With this approach he might temporarily change people's behavior but he won't change their hearts.)

They ask, "What can we do?" "Produce fruit that shows you have changed you hearts and lives," he answers. (How do we know when we've produced enough fruit? I always feel I haven't. That's the problem with John the Baptist and why he doesn't comfort me. You never know if you have done enough and so you live in fear.)

John the Baptist anticipates they will minimize the threat by saying, "Bad things can't happen to us, we are God's chosen people, the favored ones." He takes that away when he says, "And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones."

We too have a thick strand of exceptionalism in our national identity. Like the people to whom John is speaking, we see ourselves as unique in history with a special God-given mission. Does that mean we have a mandate to share more of our wealth? Or do we use our sense of being

special to justify our violence, making our violence good, unlike theirs, when the problem is human violence itself.

John continues. “The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed in the fire.” John seems to be picturing his audience as a forest of trees under attack by an ax that is going to take them out at the base. Only the trees that show fruit get spared and avoid the flames. John has a fiery imagination!

The crowd catches his intensity and asks, “What then should we do?” Their anxiety rises to match John’s. “He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”

John the Baptist says we must share if we want to avoid the ax. He pictures the ax as threatening all the trees; the whole forest. He’s not thinking of personal salvation. He is thinking of whole cultures. He seems to imply we have to live in awareness of the world, our fellow inhabitants on planet earth, and share with them. We can’t continue making sure we get our big slice of the pie when others have almost nothing and keep clear of disaster. Share and live in peace or refuse to share and face the ax poised at the root of all the trees.

John the Baptist has been living in the wilderness, on the edge, dressed in rough clothes and eating what he can find. Looking from where he looks, he sees the inequalities in the world and senses the buildup of tension the inequality fosters. He is living outside the cultural matrix and can see its inherent flaw. He knows in his bones that if some have too much and others have too little the inevitable result is angry judgement—and the judgement is not coming from God. Nowhere in the text does it say God does the judging. We have been reading that in and so did John the Baptist. But for Luke, the judging comes from other humans. Maybe that’s what John intuited but couldn’t put his finger on when he called the crowd “children of snakes.” He knew that humans can’t be trusted in their social relations and bite each other with lethal venom.

When things are out of balance, human wrath gets going. Even if we think we are exceptional and deserving of our special place, the wrathful ax doesn’t care. John the Baptist’s solution is to share so that the divisions diminish. I suppose this could translate into more progressive tax codes and an agreement where the developed nations, with more financial resources, help those nations with less. This is what the climate control negotiators in Paris worked on this week.

Jesus once commented that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets. Did he say this because John sees something fundamentally true about humans? Could he see how exquisitely aware we are of each other; aware of who is ahead of whom and who is behind? Who has more and who has less? Did he see how we constantly compare and if we find ourselves doing poorly, we plot to catch up or get ahead? It is human nature and extremely potent. Humans will die to get even. (This gives us an insight on suicide bombers in relation to the west. They sacrifice themselves so the group they represent has the satisfaction of thinking they are getting even.)

The trick is to manage the divisions and keep the gap as small as possible. Otherwise envy-pressures and the defensive protections against them, build up. “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.” We share to avoid the angry judgement of force and counter-force with violence on both sides.

This must have made sense to a lot of people at the time. Our text says, “The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ.” The correct diagnosis of the human problem had raised such hope in the people that they wondered if John the Baptist might be the promised Messiah.

But diagnosis of an incurable condition does not heal the incurable condition. Something more was needed and John the Baptist knew it. He replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals.” John the Baptist senses need for a quantum leap, a paradigm shift, a totally out-of-the-box, and beyond-imagination response to the human crises he sees brewing.

John’s faith is not in himself or his capacity to diagnose. It is in God who is sending a Powerful One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Holy Spirit is that heart-centered desire to lay aside self-centeredness and instead, embrace what is best for all.

And fire, well there’s that fire again; that haunting oh-so-human-way of getting rid of evil. You project evil on to the other and then burn them up, purify through fire, leaving the good part and burning off the bad. You separate into parts and destroy the part you deem less worthy, divide wheat from chaff, husks from grain, and good from bad. It’s the only solution John knows. John’s solution and those before John always includes separation and fire. This is why John waits for the Messiah, someone profoundly different from himself, the one whose sandal he isn’t worthy to loosen.

Fire doesn’t seem to work as setting it only seems spread it; but what will work? John the Baptist sees no alternative but the Coming One brings one. That’s the good news that we await in Advent. He is already here, born in a manger.

The Coming One brings a solution to spreading fire by becoming the chaff. He allows himself to be burned by our raging fires and then forgives us as we consume him. This is his refining fire. This is how he separates the wheat from the chaff and gathers the wheat into his granary. We are the wheat salvaged from our own fire and his resurrection salvages us all. His forgiveness is the flame that burns the husks of violence we generate. By allowing himself to be the burning husks he changes our hearts to where peace is possible. With changed hearts we want to share our two shirts with those who have none and likewise our food.

On this third Sunday of Advent we await the Coming One who burns away our chaff and cleans off his threshing floor, moving us into his barn of peace. It is the barn into which he was born. Amen.