

Year A, 2nd Sunday of Advent
December 4th, 2016
Thomas L. Truby
Matthew 3:1-12

A New Fire!

On the second Sunday of Advent we always talk about John the Baptist; the transitional figure in the move from an old way of living life to a new way of living that centers on what Jesus has revealed to us.

John was a different sort of guy. He dressed differently, ate different food, and had a life-style radically different than his contemporaries. He didn't see things in conventional ways. His message was popular; everyone was drawn to him. He didn't go to them. They came to him; came clear out into the wilderness to see him.

His message inspired them. They knew something was deeply wrong and they wanted to fix it. They thought it had to do with their moral lives and so they confessed their sins to John the Baptist. John baptized them as a way of confirming their desire to change. It signaled having their old desires washed down the river so they could start afresh.

Even Pharisees and Sadducees; the elite, educated, upper crust came. John the Baptist wasn't so kind to them. "He said to them, 'You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?'"

John the Baptist speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees goes on. "Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives." What fruit is he talking about? Does he want them to drop out of their comfortable lives and live like him? Does he want them to eat more simply, dress in clothes no one else will wear, and become homeless out in the desert?

The word "fruit" is a loaded term. Rome constantly talked about the Pax Romana; the peace of Rome, and they said it allowed for political and economic stability. They saw peace and prosperity as the "fruit" of knuckling-under to Rome. John the Baptist thinks the Sadducees and the Pharisees live off Roman fruit and he doesn't like it.

The Sadducees were the governing class who gained their wealth by cooperating with the Romans. It's obvious how they benefited from Rome. The Pharisees were religious people, a kind of lay-witness mission really, who won their place in culture by being against the Romans and the Sadducees. They said if people would just clean up their act and be more religious, God would reward them by giving them victory. Of course, when the Romans were defeated the Pharisees would be the new chief administrators. Do you think the fruit they produce will be

that much better than the old? John the Baptist doesn't think so because what he says next is even harsher.

"Don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father." John the Baptist sees Caesar as their father in two different and opposite ways. For the Sadducees Caesar is their father by virtue of eating from his table. For the Pharisees their identity as a group was built on being the enemies of Caesar. It's not that they are for the people and pointed to God. No, they are against Rome and their brothers who collaborate with Rome. That's who they are. Both groups have cut themselves off from Abraham, the real father of them all.

John the Baptist tells them God doesn't need them to populate his kingdom. "I tell you God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones," he says. God can bring forward people from places you would never think of. They could be common people without education you think below you, they could be non-religious people with a keen eye for hypocrisy that you would never include, they could be folks with light skin and dark skin and cultural backgrounds different from all of you. People may look like inert stones to you but God can bring forward Abraham's children from places you don't appreciate.

"The ax is already at the root of the trees." John the Baptist sounds so angry. What trees is he talking about and who has the ax?

"Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire." Tossed into the fire! What vision dances in his head? Apparently the criteria for determining whether or not a tree gets cut down is the fruit it produces. It doesn't depend on how tall the tree, how green the leaves, how thick the bark or how much shade it casts; it depends solely on the quality of its fruit.

Is the church producing good fruit? Is the church teaching people how to love and not point the finger? Does the church practice loving our enemies and including the stranger? Does it help the poor and visit those in prison?

As followers of Jesus our identity comes from Jesus who substituted himself for the victim at the center of the lynching. If we follow Jesus, instead of joining the lynchers we support those being lynched. Our identities are in the process of changing from those who are over-against to those who refuse to join the crowd in being over-against anyone.

This may put us at odds with the crowd who wants unanimity in the pointing of the finger. Are we willing to suffer and sacrifice when we are attacked? Is the institutional church a tree that will be cut down for lack of fruit? If it falls it will be because history has judged it of little value. We didn't have anything to say to our culture and times and so our culture simply lost interest

and turned away. That's how the church will be cut down. It won't be some supernatural judgement from God.

And now John the Baptist comes to the point of his white-hot observations. "I baptize with water. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Does John the Baptist understand what the one who comes after him will be like? No, he can't. He lives before the crucifixion and resurrection. He can't grasp that the Holy Spirit is God's spirit of compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love revealed in Jesus. It is the very embodiment of the good fruit that John the Baptist has been pointing toward. And this fire that Jesus gets baptized with; it's the fire of love. It's a love so deep and intense that it propels him to choose to be engulfed in our flames of hate, violence and retribution so that we can see what we do and allow ourselves to be forgiven. This is why John the Baptist says he is not worthy to carry Jesus' sandals. Jesus' way is so much better than John the Baptist's but John, even as he says that, can't understand how.

We see the limitation of his vision in the next sentence. "The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." John the Baptist thinks he is talking about separating some people from others through some kind of divine intervention. Actually John the Baptist envisions a truth that lies deeper than he can know; like a painter who paints beyond his own understanding or a musician who expresses music beyond his vocabulary.

The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. He uses it to separate God from all violence. When he cleans the threshing floor and all the wheat is in his barn, all humans are in the barn. The husks that get burned in a fire that can't be squelched turn out to be hatred, violence, greed and the pointing of the finger. When he chose to go to the cross and inhabit the resurrection he lit the husks with the fire of love and the fire continues to burn our chaff away. On this second Sunday of Advent we celebrate the fire even as it burns in us. Amen.