

## **Year C-Advent 3-2018-Separating from Violence**

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**Luke 3:7-18**

### **Separating from Violence**

The crowds come to the river to be baptized and John the Baptist calls them “a brood of vipers.” He whips them with words like a drill sergeant in basic training and still they come. Wrath is coming and you are fleeing to the wilderness, he tells them. Who told you to get away from the places where other people live, the flash points among you; the areas where tensions build and can suddenly explode? John the Baptist suggests their problem has to do with their dealings with others?

They are coming out from their cities and villages, away from all their troubled relationships, to be baptized, washed, and cleansed as a sign of being sorry for how they have ignored God and treated their neighbor. John tells them to show they are serious about their repentance in what they do. And, he says, if you think you are so special that there will be no consequences for your behavior, think again. God is not bound by your boundaries and the fact that you look at yourselves as children of Abraham means nothing to God. God looks at what you do, not what you say. And so John the Baptist raked them over the coals—not a bad metaphor for what he is about to say.

“Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” They hear threatening, frightening, aggressive language with an ambiguity about who wields the ax come to cut them down and who stokes the fire into which the cut timber is thrown. Danger, danger, danger, there is danger in the land reserved for those who don’t bear good fruit. John the Baptist spreads anxiety and the gathered crowds catch it.

They are feeling apprehensive and endangered; their protective illusions stripped away. Now they are in touch with a reality they prefer to avoid. What should they do? How can they fix it?

This Christmas we have gotten numbers of solicitations from good organizations responding to crises on many fronts. We read what they tell us and we know it’s true. Our hearts are sobered and our fears pushed forward into awareness. For example, people need being fed, houses need being built, laws need being changed or upheld, the hopeless need hope in the form of an animal or a fish they can own that gives them a place from which to start, wars need to be stopped, diseases need to be treated, refugees need to be cared for and our earth needs to be protected and renewed so that our children will have an inhabitable place to live. All of these things and more cause us anxiety and make the world feel dangerous to us. We respond to as

many of them as we are able knowing that in so doing it calms our anxiety, responds to human need and honors God. At least we are doing something, we say.

When the crowds asked John the Baptist what they should do, he responded: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even the culturally despised tax collectors, who regularly overcharged on taxes and pocketed the difference, wondered what they should do. "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you," John said. Soldiers used to throwing their weight around for their own gain, asked what to do. "Do not extort money from anyone by threat or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages," he replied.

So everyone could do something and the idea they could all work together to make the world a better place so energized the crowd that they were filled with expectation. Maybe they could change the world. Maybe this kind of charismatic leader was just what they needed. Maybe he could get them all working together under threat of fire. Maybe he was the Messiah!

Oh-oh, the crowd is going in the wrong direction. They are chasing another charismatic leader. They are asking more of John the Baptist than he can deliver. John the Baptist's analysis of the problem ends with the law. Something more was needed, something beyond John the Baptist's imagination and John knew it. Right then and there he told them that he wasn't the Messiah. "I baptize you with water," he said. "But the one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

"The coming one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire," he said. John the Baptist lives in a world that thinks God is wrathful and he uses the threat of wrath to whip up the crowd but he knows something new and unimaginable is coming and they are on the cusp of it. John is a bridge to a place he has never gone. A new era in history is about to begin. The crippled human species will soon be ready to throw away its crutches and walk in the fresh air of love and forgiveness.

The divinely inspired poetry in John's words goes beyond John's understanding. He says the coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Isn't the Holy Spirit the spirit of Jesus who is gentle, inclusive, forgiving and willing to suffer rather than impose suffering? He certainly wouldn't wield an ax and nor would his Abba. Those baptized by the Holy Spirit live in a state of grace where they know they are loved and have no need to gain ascendancy over their neighbor. It's a wonderful place.

What about being baptized with fire? Humans build culture by separating "our" people from those "other" people we don't know, like or trust. They are different from us and probably evil, we say. We must build a wall against them lest they infiltrate us and ruin our purity. But what

if the baptismal fire Jesus brings burns away the chaff of “us and them” and the violence it generates?

What if, in the arch of human history, the time has come when we no longer need to expel people, dividing ourselves into us and them, and bringing upon ourselves all the suffering that engenders? What if there is another way and the Messiah has come to show us how it works? John, who the people think might be the Messiah, describes this coming one as more powerful than he and so above him that he is not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. Is the Son of God far above John? Is he above us all? Should we imitate him?

Think about wheat and chaff for a moment. While the wheat is green the hulls cover the wheat seed and protect it from harm. Once it is fully mature the hull turns brown, loses its connection to the seed and drops away. Like the mature wheat, we have come of age, and the hull has dropped away. We are ready to see that all of us are the children of God and the thrashing process is not about separating good people from bad people but about separating all people from the chaff of our exclusionary and hateful ways.

Maybe at one time we did need these mechanisms like the wheat seed needed its hull but that time has passed and John is the announcer of a new stage in human cultural evolution. Now the hull that once protected the immature seed must be separated out and burned. This is why John the Baptist says the one coming carries a winnowing fork in his hand. Winnow forks were used to throw up the wheat, straw and chaff so that the wheat dropped back to the ground, the chaff blew away in the wind and the straw was pitched aside to be fed to the animals or used for bedding.

My friends, we are the wheat in this story and by God’s love and forgiveness, destined for the granary, and not fire unless it is a fire of our own making. This slow process of separating ourselves from violence is why we sing carols of peace at Christmas and gaze upon the Madonna and child. On this third Sunday of Advent let us prepare our hearts for Christmas. Amen.