

Luke 3:7-18 ⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him,
"You brood of vipers!
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"
⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance.
Do not begin to say to yourselves,
'We have Abraham as our ancestor';
for I tell you,
God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.
⁹ 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."
¹⁰ And the crowds asked him,
"What then should we do?"
¹¹ In reply he said to them,
"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none;
and whoever has food must do likewise."
¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized,
and they asked him,
"Teacher, what should we do?"
¹³ He said to them,
"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."
¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him,
"And we, what should we do?"
He said to them,
"Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation,
and be satisfied with your wages."
¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation,
and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John,
whether he might be the Messiah,
¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying,
"I baptize you with water;
but one who is more powerful than I is coming;
I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."
¹⁷ 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."
¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations,
he proclaimed the good news to the people.

We have a guest coming over.

We will spend days and weeks preparing for this guest's visit –
cooking, cleaning, decorating, anticipating his every desire.

But we just know that the minute he walks in the door,
he's going to look at all of our stuff
and decide it's either too nice –
because we like to show off our wealth –
or not nice enough –
because we didn't put our best foot forward.

Our house will either be too clean –
because we have misplaced priorities –
or not clean enough –
because we are a lazy slob.

The kind of music we play will be all wrong –
not tasteful enough
or not socially aware.

He'll tell us that the kind of food we're serving is sub-par –
not environmentally conscious
or too expensive
and therefore lacking an awareness
of those who cannot afford food.

Nothing we do will be good enough for this guest.
He's coming to our house for the sole purpose of judging us.

Isn't this the feeling we get about Jesus' visit
as we read John's warnings
about the ax lying at the foot of the non-fruit-bearing tree
and the chaff being burned in unquenchable fire?

If John isn't even worthy to act as Jesus' slave and untie his sandals,
who do we think we are trying to invite this Jesus guy into our lives?
What kind of relationship could Jesus possibly want with us,
who have a closet full of coats and pantries full of food?

It feels as though we could spend our whole lives preparing for God's coming,
readying ourselves for relationship with Jesus,
and it still wouldn't be enough.

How can we possibly be prepared for the coming of God to earth,
for a holy and perfect and righteous God
taking on complicated, messy flesh?

Well that's exactly the problem John was hoping to address
when throngs of people came flocking to the wilderness.
They pulled themselves away from the first-century equivalent
of email and spreadsheets and curriculum and briefs.
They dropped their yard work and vacuuming and baking and treadmills.
They walked out of boutiques and box stores and malls.
And they came in droves to the desert –
to the place their ancestors had been saved
and shaped into God's own chosen people.
They left the safety of everyday life and routine and self-important busy-ness
to restore their relationship with God,
to be cleansed and made new.

You can just see them as they approach John,
waving to him in the distance.
“There he is! We're almost there!”
Full of hope and expectation
and perhaps even joy at the new life ahead of them,
at the excitement of meeting this charismatic wilderness prophet,
they rush to the riverside.

And just as they arrive in earshot of the prophet, he shouts:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!”

I imagine we can all remember a time in our lives
when we were just having a good time,
minding our own business,
making Mom a nice bouquet from the neighbors garden,
or practicing writing your name on the kitchen wall,
and hearing all of a sudden

“What in the world are you doing?!”

Your heart stops and your blood runs cold
because you've just gotten in trouble for doing something
you *thought* was a really good idea.

When I was about two years old,
I had the cutest little pigtails.
They sat up high on my head
and had that perfect little pigtail wave.
Well, one night when my parents were having friends over
(don't kids always do the most ridiculous things when company is coming over?),
I watched my dad in the bathroom trimming up his hair
with a pair of scissors.

Later that night,
as my folks were laughing and chatting in the kitchen,
I tromped into the room,
beaming with a sense of accomplishment,
holding high for all to see
the pigtail I managed to snip off
with the scissors my dad had left on the bathroom counter.
I don't remember what my parents shouted at me,
but it may as well have been something to do with vipers and wrath
because it wasn't good.

But I didn't know!
Kids don't know the difference between dandelions in the empty field
and the neighbor's prize-winning peonies.
Kids don't know you'll be any less enthusiastic about their burgeoning writing skills
when they're displayed on the kitchen wall
instead of on the mundane lines of a sheet of paper.

And what did these poor people know about the coming of God,
the advent of the Messiah,
when they came out to be cleansed and renewed?

We feel bad for them.
It seems unfair that they got such a shock
when they arrived at the Jordan river.

But at the same time,
we know they were listening.

When we get in trouble unexpectedly,
all our senses go into overdrive.
If we didn't know we were doing anything wrong,
we sure as heck want to know why we're in such deep trouble
so we can avoid it in the future.

So I don't know if John was really angry or judgmental,
but he sure did know how to get the people's attention.

He follows up his welcome by telling them
they had better be sorry for what they've done OR ELSE,
and not only that,
but he better be able to SEE that they're sorry.

The crowds came out to the wilderness to be good Jews,
to do the right thing,
to do what children of Abraham do.

John's a prophet,
they want to follow him,
get cleansed,
go their merry way.

And John tells them,
"don't give me that 'I'm a child of Abraham' excuse.
You're not getting out of this that easily."

So then the crowds start to panic.

What else are they supposed to be doing?
What are they even supposed to be sorry for?
Judging from what John tells them,
I don't think they even knew!

Now that they're REALLY listening,
John starts into what he was destined to do from before his birth.
He begins preparing the people for Jesus' visit.
And he begins by telling them
what their lives will look like
when they are ready for Jesus.

And frankly,
it's not all that bad.
Know when enough is enough.
If you've got two of the same thing,
give one to someone who doesn't have one.
John's not even asking them to deprive themselves.
Just make sure you know when enough is enough.
He applies this in the broad strokes of basic needs like clothing and food –
something we all have and we can all share.

But then these tax collectors get the sense that
maybe there's a little something more they ought to be doing.
We all know tax collectors have this stereotype in scripture,
and in fact, in the culture of first-century Palestine,
of being greedy and extorting money for personal gain.
So maybe there was a little extra guilt implied
in the question from those engaged in this profession.
Or maybe we should see here
that even those who were purposefully deceitful
had a sudden change of heart in the face of John's harshness.

In any event, John's answer is again surprisingly mild.

He doesn't tell the tax collectors they need to find a new line of work
and quit empowering the evil Roman Empire.

He just tells them to do their job and quit being rascals.

The same goes for the soldiers who come next.

They aren't told to make their swords into plowshares
and organize a peaceful resistance to the Empire.

John just tells them,

"do your job, and knock it off with the bullying."

Puh. We can do *that*.

I mean, I got a couple extra coats I can bring up to
Baldwin Center or Fort Street or Orchards.

We can pick up a gift card for another family at the grocery store
when we go to do our holiday food shopping.

We can do our jobs without deceit or malice.

That ain't so hard.

You can understand why the crowd starts liking this guy.

He gives them clear expectations that are easy to achieve.

He looks and sounds a lot like the prophets of old.

He's talking about God coming in judgment
and preaching repentance.

And they like his style.

"Heeeeeey, maybe this guy's the Messiah! That would be cool!"

"Oh no," says John,

"I'm not the Messiah."

These people obviously have no idea what they're in for.

"You think I'm so great," says John,

"I'm not even worthy to be the slave of the one who is coming."

Then John tells them that *he* is preparing them with this baptism of repentance.

His job is help them understand what people who belong to God look like –
how they live and act in the world.

The *Messiah* is coming, John says,

to baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire,

and to separate the wheat from the chaff

(oh, and burn up the chaff in unquenchable fire).

Ugh. So now we're back to the fire and judgment.

Maybe all *John* wants people to do is be slightly less self-serving,
hang a hat on the mitten tree,
but this one coming after him is serious business.
Even John looks like a schmuck next to him.
It's like when Grandma comes to visit
and the first thing she says to your pretty older sister is
"My, you've put on some weight,"
you know that whatever she says to you is not going to be good.

But we read just a little further,
and it says that John was proclaiming *good news* to the people.
What is so good about anybody burning in unquenchable fire?
What's so good about somebody who makes John,
this charismatic spirit-man, look shabby?

Well, I think we have to put what John says about those fruits of repentance,
what it means to live like a child of God,
together with what the Messiah is about,
with all this wheat and chaff business.

Essentially what John does
is help people carve off from the lives they are already living
all the stuff that keeps them from seeing and knowing and loving God.

Wear a coat, sure,
but don't weigh down your life with two of them.

You got one coat,
you wear it when it's cold,
nobody wants it when it's warm –
you don't worry about it.

You got two coats,
and suddenly you have to worry about where to keep it,
how to keep someone from stealing it when you're not wearing it,
how to keep moths from eating it while it sits in the closet.

Suddenly, a coat is not just a coat.
It's this thing that takes up mental and emotional space in our lives
and we don't have time to pray or read the bible or do acts of mercy
because we've got dry-cleaning.

And it creates one more hurdle to loving our neighbor
because now we have to worry about them stealing our extra coat.

GIVE THEM THE COAT, says John.

Okay, and the same with the food.

John says, do your job.
We don't all need to run out and become sidewalk prophets
or work for non-profits
or go live with the poor in third world countries.
We don't have to do that to escape the coming wrath.
Somebody needs to be out there,
growing food and making clothes and building houses
and keeping order and collecting taxes for social services.
But when we don't run our business or teach our class or interact with our customers
in a way befitting a child of God,
we are showing our lack of preparation
for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives and into the world.
Or, to put it more positively,
when we *are* living our lives,
doing our jobs,
in a way that glorifies God,
whether we're raising children and caring for our household
or involved with international business,
we are showing that we are ready to live in that world
where the poor hear good news, the captives are released,
the blind see, and the oppressed are set free.

And what John is telling those who have come to him,
who have come in search of that world, is,
"here's what it looks like.
Here's what you'll look like when you live in it."
But the people can't *make* it happen,
and neither can John.

This one coming after John,
Jesus, the Messiah, God's anointed one,
will separate the wheat from the chaff
and burn the chaff in unquenchable fire.
Now, I can't claim to know what exactly John's intent was in that prophetic statement.
It might have been very different from how I'm hearing it today.
But what I understand in that statement is not these two groups of people –
wheat people and chaff people.
You see, chaff is part of the stalk of wheat.
Chaff and wheat aren't two separate categories,
they're parts of the same thing.
As the wheat grows,
the chaff is a protective outer shell for the grain.
But when it's ready for harvesting,
the chaff is no longer needed,
and so in threshing we get rid of it,
and we keep the useful part.

This is what John says Jesus is coming to do.
Not to destroy some people and keep others.
But to get rid of the things we no longer need to protect ourselves
so that we can be food for growing God's purpose in the world.
When we could only rely on ourselves to be righteous,
when the law was the only way to salvation,
we might have needed some protection.
The religious leaders who always get picked on in the gospels
might have needed their chaff to keep themselves clean,
protect themselves from defilement.
The tax collector and the soldier might have needed their chaff
to make a job they didn't feel good about,
a job that defined them as a traitor to their community,
bearable and somehow worthwhile.
When it's up to us to fend for ourselves in the world,
we might need our chaff –
our extra coat and our extra food –
to offer some security.

But Jesus came, and is coming,
to replace the chaff.
He's getting rid of our chaff
so that we can live lives totally dependant
on God and God's grace.

Jesus is not coming to tell us that we are not doing enough,
that we are not good enough.
Jesus has come,
and that is enough.
Jesus comes into our lives
to give us enough and to make us enough.

We have a guest coming over.

We will spend days and weeks preparing for this guest's visit –
singing and praying, doing acts of mercy, and loving our neighbors.
And we just know that the minute he walks in the door,
he's going to look at us, and love us,
and all those things we don't need
will be tossed out and burned up
so we won't be tempted to add them back into our lives.
We will know we are good enough for this guest.
We will know we have enough for this guest.
Because all we are and all we need
is this most special and honored guest
who has come for the sole purpose of loving us.