

Year C Advent 3 John addresses the crowd at the river

Well, John is not out to make friends in today's Gospel story. The crowd is eagerly gathering at the river to check him out and he greets them by ripping a strip off them... "You brood of vipers" he yells at them. Not exactly a warm welcome.

Then, John goes on to terrify all of the little kids in the crowd – and probably a lot of the adults, too – with the frightening picture he paints of the Messiah...He's coming to baptize with fire with a winnowing fork in his hand to weed out all you bad apples and burn you. It sounds like a tale of horror kids tell each other at sleepovers, or around a campfire, to see who'll be the first to crack with the fear.

Finally, the story wraps up with the most puzzling bit. "And with other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news." Good news? Vipers, axes, fire, and winnowing forks? Where is the good news?

I find it intriguing that we are in a time of waiting just as those people by the Jordan River were so long ago. Like them, we yearn for our Saviour and wonder when he will come, what is taking him so long? Advent, in particular, is the church season of waiting – it is a time of expectant hope, waiting for the coming of Jesus and we are hearing John's words as we wait. John is speaking to us today just as surely as he was speaking to that crowd in the Gospel story.

So, let's take a closer look at John's words to discover the good news.

First of all, we need to know who was in the crowd. Based on this story and other crowds in Luke, we know they were poor so they weren't highly thought of in their community. We hear from the tax collectors in the crowd – they were considered low-life traitors and swindlers. And, we hear from the soldiers – not

the honourable sort we picture, that we acknowledge on Remembrance Day. These soldiers were mercenaries – do anything for a dollar kind of guys. In other words, this crowd, like most of the other crowds in the Gospel of Luke, were the outcasts of society...the riff-raff. These were the people dismissed by society as those who surely would not enter the kingdom of God. They were very often not even allowed to worship in the temple.

But, when John speaks to them, he doesn't address their social status, he addresses their attitude. He calls them a brood of vipers – he says they can't count on being saved just because they have Abraham in their family tree. That tree is in danger of being chopped off at the root. But, John doesn't dismiss them entirely. He gives them hope. He tells them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. He says, "Your pedigree will get you nowhere but your actions will."

Bear fruits worthy of repentance. To the different groups before him, John gives different instructions on how to bear fruit. To the poor he says, if you've got two coats then give one to someone who doesn't have one at all. Be generous with the little you have. Be generous.

To the tax collectors, who were notoriously corrupt, he says don't collect more taxes than you're supposed to be collecting. Do your job but, do it with integrity.

To the soldiers, those mean-spirited bullies, he warns don't threaten people in order to get money from them and be happy with what you're getting paid legally. Do your job but, do it with integrity and be content with what you've got. The soldiers get a double whammy from John. Live with integrity. Be content.

John matches up the actions they need to do with the lives that they are already living. Everything he demands of them is within their reach. He tells them to start where they are. Even more importantly, each of the actions John advises is crucial in building healthy, mutually giving relationships. Our God is a God of relationship, existing in community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To be in relationship with God we must also, therefore, be in healthy, mutually giving relationship with all the rest of God's creation.

So, John is telling us to live in healthy, mutually caring, mutually giving communities of people who are all considered neighbours and we are to start where we are in our life situation, right now.

And what will be doing when we start? John lays it out – you heard him list three things to do, three ways of living that will guarantee that we will bear fruits worthy of repentance...Live with generosity, integrity, and contentment.

Simple. But simple doesn't mean easy. Live lives of generosity...It may be hard to be generous when you're uncertain of the future and think "Maybe I'll need that for myself." How easy is it for our ACW to give away all their hard-earned money to needy organizations in our community when the church itself could easily swallow up all of that money and more?

Live with integrity...we are all basically good people but, that doesn't mean there's no room for improvement. Most people are pretty quick to raise a fuss if we think we are being short-changed. How many of us are just as quick to head back into a store when we realize we weren't charged enough? That happened to me and Jay recently at Metro. We bought a big case of Perrier water because it was on sale for \$8 but as I checked the receipt on the way back to the car, we'd

only been charged \$2. The girl had scanned one bottle instead of the code for the whole case. I showed Jay the receipt and he went back into the store to pay the difference. I said to Jay afterward, for a brief instant I thought “Big deal – it’s only \$6, they’ll live. Metro doesn’t need my six dollars,” but pretty much at the exact same time I was already thinking, “I’d better tell Jay so he can go back in and fix this up.” I wouldn’t have been able to drive away without paying the extra money.

Live with contentment? How do you teach people to be content with what they’ve got? We live in a society that constantly pushes people to get more – more money, more stuff, a bigger house, a newer car...People who are content with the basics simply are not the norm. People who are content, are often those who were raised that way, shown to be content through the example of parents, grandparents, and other care givers. Being content is something we come to believe in our heart. It’s the same with all of these three things – generosity, integrity, and contentment. These are learned things.

As Christians, we learn from the good examples of others around us and we learn from what we read and hear in the Scriptures. We learn from John today but we also certainly learn from Jesus in the rest of Luke’s Gospel. We learn from Jesus’ life and words that God’s kingdom is here and the fulfillment of that kingdom is coming. It is a kingdom in which everyone is generous, content with the “enough” that they have, and where everyone lives with integrity. We don’t do nice things simply because we’re nice people. It’s deeper than that. We act because we know what we’re aiming for – the perfection of God’s kingdom. With every act of love we hasten God’s kingdom. With every act of love we bring complete fulfillment that much closer.

And with God's kingdom will come justice. That is perhaps a scary part, or at least a worrisome part, of today's Gospel reading – our pedigree, the label of Christian, will get us nowhere, says John. John tells us Jesus will come with a winnowing fork – the wheat will be saved and the chaff will be thrown into the unquenchable fire.

We often think of the wheat and the chaff as multiple people – the good people (the wheat) will be welcomed into God's perfect kingdom but the bad people (the chaff) are doomed to unquenchable fire. This is perhaps unsurprising since we operate in a society whose mantra is "You get what you deserve." What we deserve could be bad or good, a punishment or a reward, but we will get what we deserve. However, God does not operate like that. Not one of us is perfect – not yet – we have all fallen short of the glory of God but, while we were still sinners, Jesus saved us. The wheat and the chaff is not talking about good people and bad people. The wheat and the chaff are one entity. The wheat is the edible stuff, the good stuff on the inside, the stuff that is saved. The chaff is the outer covering of the wheat, the stuff you can't eat, the bad stuff that is thrown away and burned. Each one of us is broken but each one of us also contains much that is good. God will embrace our goodness and purge all the brokenness so that we are holy and blameless before him when he comes.

There are two distinct pieces to our salvation, to our turning to God, outlined in this Gospel story. We must look inward to discover and nurture our wheat – our good stuff. We look inward to discern our chaff – the not so good stuff, asking God to help us purge this chaff from our lives. And then there is the outward looking to discern with God what bearing fruit will look like for us as individuals

and as the body of Christ together. What does it look like to live lives of integrity, generosity, and contentment in our communities? Both pieces of our salvation require God's help to get to the perfection we know is coming – the perfection of the world and the perfection of our selves.

Let us hear again John's words about our Messiah for whom we await this Advent. Let us hear these words without fear and trepidation but with the sure and certain hope of a people whose God does not give them what they deserve but, rather, gives them purifying love. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," says John. "Our Messiah will gather the wheat into the granary but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire...And so John proclaimed the good news to the people."