

## Baptism of Fire—Third Sunday of Advent

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[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#)

[Isaiah 12:2-6](#)

[Philippians 4:4-7](#)

[Luke 3:7-18](#)

*Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT*

You may have noticed that our Scripture readings this morning seem to have quite a bit of cognitive dissonance. They seem to sort of be in different keys. This small portion of Paul's letter to the Philippians sums up one side well: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice." And the prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah invite the people of Israel to: "Rejoice and exult..." and to "Shout aloud and sing for joy..." But, on the other side, in Luke's Gospel we have harsher images—John calls those who have come out to him a "brood of vipers"! And the image of burning fire looms large as well. How can we square these contrasting images: one of rejoicing because God is awesome and wonderful—and another of judgment and repentance?

Well, there is a little detail in both Zephaniah and Isaiah that is very important. The prophet Isaiah writes: "Surely *God* is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid..." Those from our Cross-Generation class will perhaps remember: trusting in God was only one of many options for the people of Israel in Isaiah's time! A merciless foreign power was coming to conquer these people—and God's command, that came through Isaiah, was to do nothing but trust God. But the people at this time did not trust God, so the story goes. They turned instead to chariots and horses... to alliances with neighboring powers, to things which they themselves could see and control. And it did not go well.

Zephaniah's prophecy helps us see this as well. Here, God is the agent, God is the one who acts first. God turned away their enemies God, not a human being, is king of Israel. God is the warrior who gives victory. It is God who will deal with all their oppressors.

Believe it or not: Zephaniah and Isaiah are calls to repentance too! The people have been trusting in themselves. They have been trusting their own... expertise, arsenals, common sense—their bank accounts, their social media activity, their culture. And not trusting in God.

These things surely have some value... but they will lead us astray, in the end, just as they led astray God's people in Scripture. The people at the time of John the Baptist trusted in their cultural DNA—their heritage as descendants of Abraham—more than God. John says, "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." John says this is just complacency, that who-you-think-you-are is not the point, but, of course, the point is—who God is.

Scripture this morning is exploding with images of who God is, what God does—the Lord takes away judgment, the Lord rejoices over us, the Lord brings us home, the Lord is our strength, the Lord is close by, in our midst—and as Paul says, the Lord is near.

And John the Baptist trusts of course all these things about God are true. And believing all this, John has crowds of people, from all kinds of backgrounds— soldiers and tax collectors, religious experts too—all at his feet. And they're all asking: "What do we do!?"

What does John reply? Does he say the fruits of their repentance—the fruits of trusting God—are huge, insane, undoable things? No, of course not. They are so close, so simple. John says when you know who God is, when you trust who God is... then, when you have extra—in this case coats and food—you'll share. A tax collector: a person who works with money won't cheat anyone, a soldier: a person who uses force won't abuse anyone. These are easy things. John is not talking about outlandish, saintly actions. John is talking about the gentleness that comes from trusting God.

Last Sunday there was the image from Scripture of fuller's soap. A fuller was the person who prepared sheeps' wool—with water and stomping and cleaning. The wool is not thrown out, it is prepared. This is where the image of fire comes in today, and the agricultural images of orchards and grain. *We ourselves* are orchards of trees, as a culture, as a church, as individuals. John is saying: the parts of us that stop us from trusting God, they should be—they will be—removed. God is not burning down trees: God is tending an orchard.

John tells us that he is not the Messiah, the Christ, but when this one comes, they will come baptizing with fire—cleansing, pruning, preparing with a fire that will prepare us and bring us into God's very presence.

And even more beautiful and precise is the image of wheat and chaff. Wheat as you know is a kind of grass. And grasses produce seeds. These seeds have casing or protective shells, called chaff. The chaff helps the seed mature, but it must be discarded. Either a human being removes the chaff, or the seed sprouts through it when it is planted in the earth.

Remember this: No one person is chaff, to be burned up by Jesus. No one person is wheat, to be gathered by Jesus. *We are all whole-grain wheat*. The reason Isaiah and Zephaniah and Paul are so joyful in Scripture—is because their chaff has been burned away. They rely solely on God, which means there is nothing separating them from God.

We are all whole-grain wheat, which means we all have chaff. Protective barriers that keep us from loving and trusting God, that keep us from loving and serving our neighbor. But the coming of Jesus, into the world, and into our lives again and again each year, each day—helps us to identify all these extra things, this chaff.

And as John announced, in our baptism into the body of Christ, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, all that could ever keep us from God *has been* burned away. But we can always use reminders—reminders of something that has been true since the beginning of creation, that the Lord takes away judgment, the Lord rejoices over us, the Lord brings us home, the Lord is our strength, the Lord is near.

*Amen.*

[And so you will find on the last page of your bulletin a small piece of paper in the shape of chaff, that protective coating around the wheat seed. I invite you to remain seated as we our sing our hymn of the day, which reminds us that we are forgiven, loved and free—and that nothing separates us from God, and nothing truly separates us from each other.

I invite you to think of a piece of chaff in your life, something that has already been burned up, or something that you pray that God will help you get rid of, something, an emotion, a situation, a memory, anything or everything that makes you feel separated from God, or separated from others in your life.

Write this using the pencils in your pew on the piece of chaff, and very soon we will burn them away in the baptismal font. Let this be a reminder that in our baptism Christ has burned away all division, and cleansed us of all sin.]