

Advent 3C 2009
Luke 3:7-18
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The Difference between John and Jesus

Last week, as we heard Luke introduce John the Baptist as the one who prepares the way for Jesus, I promised that today we would hear the second part of the story. Last week we were missing Jesus and even though we still don't hear his name mentioned in today's text, John certainly paints a vivid picture of him. The problem is, this Jesus is nothing like the one I was expecting. Instead of a nice, calm, tame, predictable Jesus, John tells us that the Messiah, the anointed King who comes after him, is powerful and will bathe people with Holy Wind and Fire, which is a bit more involved than being dunked in the muddy waters of the Jordan river. John's Jesus wields a pitchfork- he is a farmer who separates grain from chaff and shucks and straw so that the grain can be gathered together and kept safe in the bin while the rest is burned with a fire that never goes out. Not the Hallmark card picture most of us have in mind for the baby born in Bethlehem.

I miss my nice Jesus. I want the Jesus who meets me where I am, moves in, and doesn't seem to be too concerned with the way the house looks. I want a God who I can go too when I'm in trouble but who pretty much leaves me alone the rest of the time. I don't want this challenging Jesus, this judging Jesus, whom John claims is coming with a winnowing-fork to separate, save, and destroy. If Jesus reveals all the fullness of God, then I want a God who is satisfied with the way I manage things. A judging God, makes me pretty uncomfortable.

But the God I want, is not the God of John or Jesus. God is not unconcerned about the evil in the world or in myself. God is not satisfied with the status quo and content to let things remain as they are. God has a different future in mind for me and you and all creation -a future where every evil and destructive thing is judged for what it is – chaff that has no ability to sprout new life.

It is so easy to forget that while we are busy shopping and cooking, working and planning for our own future. We forget that God is our parent and loving parents do not stand idly by and watch their children self-destruct. God wants more for us. God wants good things for us. Very often what we need is to be changed, shaken up, woken from our complacency, and moved to ask "What can we do?" Not so that we can **avoid** the "wrath that is to come" but because we already **have**.

This is the difference that is crucial in thinking about John the Baptist. John is not Jesus. He himself even makes this point very clear. John is the last of the great prophets. His message of a coming judgment likely evokes fear in the hearts of people so that they turn from their selfishness ways and return to the Lord. That is

what is meant by repentance. It is a changing of our minds and hearts and actions. We hear a message of hope from the prophet Zephaniah this morning but this is at the very end of his book. The first chapter makes John sound tame by comparison:

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah.

[Zeph. 1:15](#) That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the LORD, their blood shall be poured out like dust,

and their flesh like dung.

Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD'S wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

[Zeph. 2:1](#) Gather together, gather, O shameless nation, before you are driven away like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the LORD, before there comes upon you the day of the LORD'S wrath.

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the LORD'S wrath.

The prophets of old were like older brothers and sisters who try to warn their younger siblings to get their act together before mom and dad get home because there is literally going to be hell to pay. It is the fear of the consequences that motivates a change in behavior and for a short time, that might get results. This is the repentance John had to offer. He was still from the old school.

But Jesus is something much different. Jesus too preaches a message of repentance but we never see him pick up a winnowing fork in the way John describes. When Jesus talks about a tree that is going to be cut down because it is not producing fruit, he has a gardener intervene and put some fertilizer around it and give it more time to be fed and nourished. Like John, Jesus wants us to change, to repent, to turn from self-righteous assessments but because of Jesus our motivation has changed. Jesus takes upon himself the wrath that should be ours. Jesus suffers for our sake. Jesus takes our blame.

Why? Well not so we have a “get out of jail free card”. – Not so that we can continue living the same way we have always been. God has come among us to birth new life! **God has lived and died as one of us so that we can be free from fear and filled with faith.** -Faith that we have been saved from the wrath that is to come. That faith prompts us to ask the question posed to John “What should we do?’ What fruit should we bear? John answers with unexpected mundaneness. It is not some grand confession, or great pilgrimage that God desires for us. God wants good things that come in small, ordinary packages. -Things that we learn in kindergarten. Do you have extra of something? Share. Be satisfied with what you have. Treat people with dignity and respect. Give away textbooks, motorcycles, boots and hats and toys. Live your life but live it in a wholly selfless and loving way.

What about each of us? What difference does confessing our faith in Jesus Christ make in the way we live our lives? What kind of fruit are we bearing? What taste do our words and actions leave in the mouths of those we encounter every day in our work and school and homes? John says the good news is that Jesus is coming. Fear has been replaced with love and love urges us to ask again and again, “What can we do?” Not because we are afraid but because we know who we are. We are branches grafted to into the tree of life. We are seeds, sorted out, saved, and planted into fertile ground. Let us go out today, asking and looking for opportunities to bear fruit that is good and pleasing to God and to one another. Amen.