

Matthew 3:1-12: **A Judgment of Grace**

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4 December 2022

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Listen with me for God's word to us from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3 (CEB):

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ² "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" ³ He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."*

⁴ John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

⁵ People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. ⁶ As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁷ Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸ Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. ⁹ And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. ¹¹ I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out."

The Ugly Christmas Prophet. That's what one of my friends¹ calls John the Baptist. It's wacky Christmas sweaters. This dude John is rockin' that old-time religion. He's got the bellowing voice of Isaiah. He wears wilderness-freak clothing like Elijah. He lives in the middle of nowhere and dines on locusts, of all things. Best of all, John gets away with calling people *out*. He lays down the judgment and proclaims that revolution is at hand. Clean up your act or face the hellfire!

Got to admit that I understand that impulse to judge. For me, it can happen in traffic. That jerk in front of me slows way down and makes a turn without signaling. Another car cuts into my lane — without signaling. Someone turning left refuses to pull out into the intersection to be ready. And how did humanity collectively forget how to merge smoothly? Driving in busy traffic can make me cranky and crusty and I want to yell like a judgmental street preacher: "You spawn of snakes!"

I'm not proud of that because all too often we preachers have been judgy. Preachers are routinely tempted to cast judgment on the church, or cast judgment on the society around us. John the Baptist looks like a tantalizing role model because almost no one escapes his critical voice — and yet crowds of folks still hike out into the desert to listen to him preach. It's a pretty sweet gig.

¹ Rev. Andrew Smith, Cookeville, TN

Maybe the listeners take John seriously because he doesn't just write people off as doomed. The kingdom of heaven is on its way, he announces, and y'all are capable of being ready for life with God. Repent, John says, and that's a hopeful notion. It means that change is possible.² Go in a *new* direction, he tells the people. "Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives."

This story also appears in Luke's gospel, and in *that* version the listeners ask John, "Alright, then what are we supposed to do?" So John tells people with two coats to give one to someone who has none. He tells tax collectors to collect no more than what's owed. He tells soldiers not to exploit civilians.

Relatively simple challenges, right? But John's kind of ethic deconstructs The Way Things Are. In an empire built on military violence, what if soldiers refused to, say, kill all children under two in the region of Bethlehem? That tragic story comes just before today's reading.

So John rightfully rails against injustice and he stands in the Jordan River baptizing people, that washing a symbol of their intention to live a changed life. Still today this is one of the meanings of Christian baptism. Last Sunday we joyfully celebrated the baptism of baby Tilly. We the whole church joined with Tilly's parents in proclaiming again: yes, we want to orient our lives toward God's ways, and we seek to share that Christ-shaped life with Tilly.

At the Jordan River, things get tense when John sees Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized. In the Bible we almost never see Pharisees and Sadducees doing anything together. These were two very different religious and political parties. Sadducees and Pharisees came from different classes; they had different loyalties, traditions, theologies.

It's as if John were watching Republicans and Democrats arriving, or Presbyterians and Baptists and Catholics all showing up. John looks at those diverse groups and he sees that what unites them is a sense of their own rightness. Each group holds their political and religious traditions as sacred. They each look for God's judgment to land on other people.

So John colorfully tells these religious insiders of various kinds: You children of snakes. You all are overconfident about your own status with God. You're so protective of your own little kingdoms that you risk losing everything when God's reign inevitably turns the world upside down. The axe is at the root of your trees, folks, John says.

If our gospel story ended there, you and I would have little to contribute into a world that is already addicted to angry judgment.

I think a lot of human judgments come straight out of fear. We humans continually perceive threats, and we protect ourselves, secreting fear that can solidify around us like a husk. When our fears become dense enough, we go rigid with them and we start to carry out our judgments. We want to root out what scares us, make the world safe again. Our tool of choice may be an ax. A sword. A cross. A handgun. An airliner. All too often what scares us is other people. We reserve the right to cut off or even eliminate people we don't know how to live with.

² Chandler Stokes makes this point winsomely in his "Matthew 3:1-6: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1, Chapters 1-13*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. p. 35.

Sometimes we institutionalize and normalize these fearful judgments, giving them respectable names like capital punishment, “stand your ground,” collateral damage, border enforcement, or religious rightness.

In this world where humans make judgments based in fear, no one is ever truly safe.

But human judgment will not get the last word, thank God.

Because while John the Baptist may have proclaimed angry judgment, John is not the one we worship. John knew that his prophetic role was simply to get people ready and point them toward God’s new thing: toward the one who is coming into the world.

John is like the teaser trailer that gets you eager to see the whole film.

John gives the crowds a preview of the Messiah’s mission. John feels unworthy even to carry that one’s sandals. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” And he will bring a new judgment: “The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”

Okay, we might think, this Messiah sounds angry too. Sounds like he’s going to separate people into two groups, saving the fruitful ones and sending the rest to hellfire. It’s an unnerving image. We might fear we won’t make the cut, but we sure *hope* we’re in that lucky group.

In Luke’s version the last line of this story says: “With many other words, John appealed to them and proclaimed *good news* to the people.”

How is this scary promise of judgment “good news”?

Well, details matter. We are rewarded by giving these verses a close reading, because it turns out that not all judgment is the same.

As John tells it, the Messiah’s tool of judgment will not be an ax, nor a sword, but a *shovel*, a farming implement! With a shovel a farmer throws harvested wheat in the air. The chaff — the dry, cracked open, no-longer-necessary protective husk that surrounded each grain — all that chaff blows away in the wind. While the grains — the heavy, solid, mature, nourished and nourishing grains — the naked grains of wheat what fall back to the floor and are gathered in.

In this metaphor, Christ is gathering us in as desirable fruits of God’s creation. As we are unsettled by the Messiah’s sifting, the wind of the Spirit blows through our lives and frees us from the dry husk of our fears and our judging. That unnecessary husk that once kept us separated from God and from others now burns away in a baptism of liberating fire. Even unquenchable fire is a blessing when it takes our fears into oblivion but does not touch the grain, the person.

In this image the wheat and the husks do not represent two different kinds of people. Every grain of wheat — like every person — has a husk around it that needs to be removed by sifting. Everyone will be judged, yet Christ’s sifting proves to be a gracious kind of judgment, one which liberates us

to live without fear. Vulnerable without our shell, but now newly available and authentic, we can be gathered into Christ's granary for the good purposes of God.

That sifting process may look and feel different for each one of us. How have *you* been tossed in the air? What has helped crack open your own husk? How is Christ's liberating love separating you from your fear?

A pastor in another state recently admitted that he feels he has spent 25 years of ministry living behind a layer of veneer. He's been afraid of letting people down. He's afraid of showing vulnerability. He's afraid of gossip. He's afraid that if he reveals how much he's hurting, people won't respect him as a community leader. He has judged the people around him to be incapable of accepting their pastor as he really is. But now, spiritual crisis and physical exhaustion are making visible cracks in that pastor's veneer. He's starting to tell the truth, and to ask for help.

I think my friend is learning what being sifted feels like, and this Advent I pray that the Holy Spirit's wind will carry away his dry husk, revealing the tender and beautiful and vibrant child of God who was always inside there. That person, free of his fearful husk, will be able to live in deep community with others, and will be ready to celebrate when God makes all things new.

Here's today's good news from John, the Ugly Christmas Prophet: Buckle up, change your hearts and lives, and get ready for the Messiah's arrival. Because Jesus Christ will not judge like we humans do. His judgment will be gracious, separating us from our worst selves and freeing us to live without fear, to begin again and again. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God who was, who is, and who is still to come.