

Third Sunday of Advent, Gospel Year C

Fiery Good News

Luke 3:7-18

Third Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Glenn L. Monson

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,[a] 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.



The One who has loved us even in our rebellion, and who has saved us, despite our indifference to his Word. Christ's cleansing fire has burned the ropes that bound us. His blazing eyes have seen into our hearts and caused us to repent.

DIAGNOSIS: Stonewalling God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Stone-Faced

It is telling that the people in the crowd that Luke names as recipients of specific instructions regarding the meaning of "fruits worthy of repentance" are people with power: The rich

(those with clothing to spare), tax collectors (who had agency that allowed them to collect more than was due), and soldiers (who, Luke points out, routinely extort, threaten, and falsely accuse others). We who have power know well those whom John addresses. Some of us hold positions of esteem and/or power in our communities. Many of us have access to all sorts of advantages that others lack. It is easy for us to live indifferently to the needs of others, saying in effect, "My life is my own. What responsibility could I possibly have to help my neighbor in need?" Our faith shows little life. Stone-faced, we gather our wheat into our granaries.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Stony Hearts

The continual theme in this passage is repentance, which we know is in the realm of the heart. As Jeremiah reminds us, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" The example of deceit in this passage is the presumption of favor that John lays bare: "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" When we convince ourselves that we don't need to be concerned with works of neighborly love, because as God's chosen we are exempt from that, we are without understanding. In this self-centered blindness our hearts are chained to self. We are, as Luther would say, *incurvatus in se*. Calling ourselves free, our hearts betray us as those whose bondage is profound beyond our knowing.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Stone Dead

The threat is real: "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." Make no mistake: John is talking judgment here. Our claim to be children of Abraham won't hold up when that day comes, for, as John says, the Creator who made Adam from the dust of the earth is more than capable of raising up faithful followers from the stones that lay about. We are chaff. We are fit for nothing except to be fuel for the fire, so

that is where we end up.

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PROGNOSIS: Fire That Sets Free

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Fiery Good News

Amongst the “many other exhortations” that John preaches, he also preaches the good news that the One who is coming is powerful beyond our knowing. Death has no hold on him. Sin has no power over him. Satan is helpless in his presence. This One baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Like the fire of the smelter that burns away the dross and leaves only the pure metal with which something new can be fashioned, so Christ comes and burns away our sin and creates us anew in his glorious image. The One who knows no sin takes upon himself our sin, and we become that which only Christ is: righteous. This is the fiery good news that finally releases us from the stony tomb in which we have been held captive.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Cleansing Fire

With hearts cleansed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we are no longer deceived by the false idols that used to seduce us: our petty good works, our ancestry, our pedigree of religiosity. Instead, we trust in the powerful one, the One who has loved us even in our rebellion, and who has saved us, despite our indifference to his Word. Christ’s cleansing fire has burned the ropes that bound us. His blazing eyes have seen into our hearts and caused us to repent. Freed, we hear the voice of Christ and eagerly ask, “What then should we do?”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Fired Up for Acts of Love

Having asked the question, we hear Christ’s answer: “Share with those in need, treat all with fairness and respect, and refrain from abusing your power. Live humbly and simply with what has been given you.” Our faith is lived out, our baptismal covenant is renewed, and when anyone asks us who we are, we no longer say, “I am a child of Abraham,” but rather “I am a stone that God has made into a child of God.”