

# Third Sunday of Advent

## JOHN THE BAPTIST LIGHTS THEM UP

Luke 3:7-18

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## Analysis by Marcus Felde

7John 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? 8Bear 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. 9Even 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."

10And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14Soldiers 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."

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John 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. 17His 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.”

18So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

*Preliminary remarks:*

*Please forgive me if I depart from the usual format, which I myself have used for years. I am currently rewording the steps for my use, and you may find this useful as well:*

*Step #1: Love short?*

*Step #2: Faith askew?*

*Step #3: Hope gone?*

*+++*

*Step #4: New hope!*

*Step #5: True faith!*

*Step #6: Great love!*

*“So faith, hope, and love abide, these three (realities—and topics); but the greatest of them is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Infernal Combustion (A Fire that Destroys Us)**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (Love Problem) :** *Come On, People!*

We infer from the exhortations of John the Baptist what were the presenting symptoms of society. He found something to criticize about the way people were failing in their various vocations. “What should we do?” the crowds asked him, and he obliged with a concrete agenda, acts of love: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.” And so forth. *Even tax*

*collectors* came and asked him what to do, and he told them. Stop harming others, start helping others, basically.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Faith Problem)** : *Was Your Daddy a Viper?*

John promoted acts of love. But he also concerned himself with the deeper question of where people were coming from. “You brood of vipers!” He warned them—and we have to think he knew what he was talking about, because they sure listened to him—that they should not rely on the fact that they had a very good ancestor, Abraham. This is the faith question.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Hope Problem)** : *Fire of Wrath!*

John’s warnings and exhortations were framed in words about the wrath of God which would destroy them because they deserved it. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Unloving actions spring from warped faith and issue in destruction. True faith and hope and love do not exist apart from one another. That is why J the B winds the topics together in this critical whip of a lesson.

**PROGNOSIS: Internal Combustion (A Fire that Recharges Us)**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Hope Answer)** : *Another One is Coming*  
John’s news is not the best news. He admits that his ministry has limited scope, but promises that one is coming who will be able to do what is necessary. The one-to-come will give the Holy Spirit! (Be careful not to assimilate the fire of v. 17 to the wrathful fire of v. 9. This is the fire of Acts 2:1-3, according to Danker, a cleansing flame with which our chaff will be burned off.) John points to one who will not merely ameliorate, but actually save. For people awaiting the axe, this (not his previous good advice) is the word of hope: That this one-to-come, who himself appears to have incurred the wrath of God on

the cross, will die a death that purifies all humankind .

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Faith Answer) :** *That One is Worthy*  
John's testimony points to Jesus as the one they should believe in. He points away from himself, even though his congregation is growing. That one, he says, wields the Holy Spirit. He directs their faith away from a static reliance on tradition toward dependence on the Son.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (Love Answer) :** *Love Like the Lord*  
John's pointing to Jesus does not undermine the instruction he gave them during the intro to faith; it undergirds it. He points to Jesus not as an alternative to changing our way of living, but as a better means of bearing fruit worthy of repentance. We preach love not as though people just need tips on living; but as though their lives depend on becoming, not viper-babies, but children of the Father.