

Being Threshed by a Real Comer
Luke 3:7-18
(Advent 3)
Analysis by Robert W. Bertram

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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? 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. 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." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has good must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 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." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Diagnosis: Threshed

Initial Diagnosis (External Problem):

Our problem, to begin with, is that we trivialize what it takes to be saved. As if by some merely external ceremony like being baptized we could "flee from the wrath to come." What a snaky way out of the fire!

Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem):

Worse yet is our equating salvation with our good intentions to do better in the future. What is worse about such a program is that it almost looks like real repentance. A preacher like John tells us we must repent and that repentance demands deeds, not just words -- bearing "fruits that befit repentance." So we respond ever so earnestly, "Fine, just tell me what exactly I should do." But that's just another, sneakier way to avoid the flames.

Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem):

Worst of all, once we realize how incapable we ourselves are of the "fruits that befit repentance," we pin our hopes for divine help -- for a Messiah -- on some Law-preacher

like John. But if it really is someone like John, with his kind of honesty, what does he tell us? Not only does he answer our "What shall we then do" with assignments we cannot possibly do, but also he admits that he himself does not begin to have the "might" we are asking of him. In fact, he adds that the One who is coming who is "mightier" than he will use his superior power to burn unfruitful trees, "the chaff," "with unquenchable fire." So much for that.

Prognosis: Salvaged

Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution):

After all this bad, dead-end news what could there possibly be in John's "exhortations" that leads his hearers -- "the people," Luke calls them -- to hear it as they evidently did, as "good news?" For the coming Christ whom John is announcing will still be bringing fire. And everyone, even those who will be spared from the burning, will at least have to undergo a very strenuous threshing, a near-death winnowing which is itself a kind of dying. How is that Good News? You know how, probably better than John himself knew. You know what it is that makes this coming Christ a real comer. He is indeed mightier by far than John the Baptist. But he shows his might not just by the way he wields his winnowing fork on others but, much more, by the way he suffers himself to be impaled on it. The way he gathers wheat from chaff is by himself being threshed first, and outlasting the threshing. Only then, because he does, can any of us survive the threshing as well.

Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution):

Better yet, The Real Comer salvages us for his granary by baptizing us one by one, not only with an external baptism by water -- that, too -- but with a baptism by fire, cauterizing us inside and out into his own dying, and then holiing us into his resurrection with his own Holying Spirit. John may not have foreseen all that but we have seen it. And our seeing it, our believing it, is itself a testimony to the Christ's baptismal Spirit.

Final Prognosis (External Solution):

Best of all, we are now able to produce "fruits befitting repentance," at least able to begin. For starters, we can already reverse the sequence of our questions. Formerly, faced with a preacher like John, we used to ask first, "What then shall we do," and on hearing his hard answer we then asked, "What Messiah will save us?" But now, thanks to The Real Comer who goes first, we already know who that Messiah is. And knowing him we can then ask next, "What shall we then do," not because we've got to but because we get to.