



THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

# *A Consuming Fire*

LUKE 3: 7-18

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So – “you brood of vipers” – it’s a strong way to start a sermon. I’ve been imagining what it would be like if I started doing that – I don’t think I’ve quite got the dramatic delivery for “you brood of vipers.” I might need to spend a couple of months camping in the wilderness first, or grow a beard or something. I don’t know – how would you all take it, if I worked my up to bellowing at full volume and started worship that way some Sunday, and really meant it? I’m guessing not well!

Given the tight timeline he was working with, the few months that he had before Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist did not care how people would take his message. He had to get it across fast, no time to be gentle or encouraging or persuasive. It is very easy to imagine John, fresh from the wilderness and looking the part of a wild, rough prophet, cutting loose at full volume in a crowded marketplace: “you brood of vipers! who told you that you’d be safe from the wrath that’s coming, just because you’re descended from Abraham? The axe is poised at the base of the tree, ready to cut it down and throw it into the fire.”

John’s opening salvo is full of alarming imagery, calling the crowd a nest of poisonous snakes, threatening wrath – judgement – and talking about fruit trees being deemed unproductive, chopped down and thrown into the fire. And worst of all, promising that God could easily raise up a new people if they didn’t repent; if they didn’t change.

What had gotten John all fired up and righteously angry?

The problem is an assumption that all the people were making. They thought that because they had a religious heritage, stretching all the way back to Abraham himself, that they belonged to God. They thought that that made them God’s people, put them on good terms with God, known to God, just because they had an ancestral connection to those whom God had always called “God’s people.”

John says, no. You can't assume that.

He uses the analogy of a fruit tree to explain why. It's very similar to a parable, a teaching story, that Jesus will use later on, which we've got written down for us in Luke 13. Jesus' delivery is maybe a little gentler, but the point is the same: a tree that does not bear good fruit is of no use to the gardener. The axe is in hand, poised at the root, to chop the tree down for good, unless it starts to produce again.

God can create a new people from the very stones around you, John proclaims. You're not safe, just because you've got the right family tree connection. You say that you belong to God, but it doesn't show; you have to produce good fruit.

However we want to put it – that the crowd talked the talk, but didn't walk the walk, that were they faithful and devoted to God only while they stood in the Temple, that they kept their beliefs in God tucked well away until they needed him for something – however we put it, the crowd had made a dangerous assumption. While they might say they believed, while they might have known the laws and how to act in the Temple, they weren't truly God's, not anymore... maybe they hadn't been for a long time.

It'd be easy for us to dismiss this proclamation that John made as being a purely historical conversation with this ethnically Jewish crowd. The phrase about God raising up a new people from stones if his current, descended-from-Abraham, people failed to shape up foreshadows the expansion of God's people to include all people, regardless of ethnicity or history.

But if we leave it at that, we're letting ourselves off the hook. Because, realistically, the charge of complacency could very easily be proclaimed in our direction, too, and that makes it worthwhile to do a bit of considering about that possibility.

What might that kind of assumed belonging to God look like today?

Well, perhaps we assume that, because we were baptised at some point, even as babies, that we are one of God's people. We might assume that because we turn up at church once or twice a year, or that we used to go, that we're good with God, no other interaction or effort required, and we can just proceed as we like every other day of our lives. We might assume that because we're reasonably decent people, who give to charity and try to be kind to others, that God will probably be okay with that and turn up when we need him.

I suspect John would say, who told you that would be enough to make you one of God's people?

The axe rests at the root of the tree, marking its place before the final swing. God may well trade us in for new people if our faith is in anything other than him, if our words and whatever performance of religiousness we put on are not real enough to transform our hearts and change our actions.

The complacent assumption of belonging to God without ever doing or thinking much about it is the first and most obvious problem that John raises; but there's a second issue, introduced more subtly, and it's another challenging one.

The writer of this gospel very deliberately fleshes out two subcategories of people within the crowd: tax collectors and soldiers.

Do you remember our A-list of earthly powers from last Sunday? Tiberius the emperor, Pilate the Roman governor, Herod and Philip and Lysanias the client kings, Annas and Caiaphas the high priests. Those are the men with power and authority; tax collectors and soldiers are their boots on the ground, the means by which their power and authority are made present and active in the communities they rule over.

The soldiers may have been Roman, they may have been of Jewish or of some other ethnic group; the tax collectors were definitely of Jewish descent, part of God's people, on paper anyway. And their professional practice, how they accomplished their work for Rome, that's included in what John condemns.

Where we might have heard a wild-looking man shouting rude names and threats, the crowd, the tax collectors, the soldiers, heard something else entirely. They heard good news.

God's people had long believed in the coming of a Messiah, someone who would save them from oppression and suffering, and they heard the character and work of this hoped-for messiah in John's harsh words. So as they came to be baptised, the crowd asked John questions, and so did tax collectors and soldiers, too. What should we do?

Last Sunday, in the first part of John the Baptist's prophetic word from God, he used Isaiah's well-known description of radical transformation to express what the coming of Jesus meant: mountains flattened, valleys lifted up, a straight and bold highway instead of a crooked way. John also made it clear that depth of transformation, this complete reversal of the landscape, is what forgiveness and repentance – turning to follow Jesus – would do to us, to our hearts and minds and lives.

I suspect that the crowd, like us, might well be wondering what the human heart equivalent of levelled mountains and risen-up valleys looks like – and John tells us. Some people don't have enough to survive, so if you have a single garment more than you need, share it. If someone is hungry, and you have a little bit more than you need, share it. If someone has no place to live, and you can help them get under cover, do it. It's so simple.

Remember that this is before Jesus began his ministry, before the apostles and churches were established that did those very things. This idea was a new one, then.

But it's still pretty radical today. Taking a look at the generous heap of warm clothes and Christmas gifts we've collected shows that we've got a sense of that new idea. But we may well struggle, and certainly there are still lots of people in our world who would rather accumulate wealth and luxuries for themselves, and give very little to those who can't get enough to eat and have warm clothes to wear.

Lessening the effects of poverty is where John begins, but by what he says to the tax collectors and the soldiers – the boots-on-the-ground of earthly power – John goes further. He addresses the root cause of poverty, too.

It's down to the exploitative and abusive systems of economic and political power those are what create the needs of others that the crowd – and we – are meant to meet. Tax collectors that are encouraged to up the tax rate and pocket the difference; soldiers who run protection rackets, extorting money from vulnerable people. Poverty is not the fault of the poor or an accident or bad luck or the way things must be.

It's the choices people with power and authority make, and the choices that we make, too, when we fall into line, when we join in the abuse, when we assume that political and economic matters are not matters of faith, for those of us who believe.

If the crowd – if we – put our own luxuries ahead of someone else's survival, how can we claim to love our neighbours as ourselves? If we ignore God's commands to produce social and economic justice, to address the root cause even as we work to make poverty survivable, how can we claim to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength?

If we say that we belong to God, it has to show; we have to produce good fruit.

But John, for all his passion and penetrating insight, is only the messenger of the one who is coming. We know that John means Jesus, who will baptise – transform and reshape us and make us God's – by the Spirit and by fire. John uses yet another image to explain what it'll be like when Jesus comes, when God's kingdom draws near. He says that it'll be like an unquenchable fire, consuming the useless, inedible, flammable chaff and leaving behind the healthy, good-to-eat wheat.

And that is very good news, for the crowd, for the tax collectors, for the soldiers and for us and the whole of creation, too. But perhaps not in the way you might be thinking.

John isn't saying that when this consuming fire comes, some people – Roman emperors, perhaps or unrepentant tax collectors, or billionaire CEOs who waste more money than it would take to feed millions of people who are starving – John is not saying that some specific people will be burned up and destroyed by Christ's transforming, winnowing fire, and others will be left unscorched and unscathed.

Soviet philosopher-historian Alexander Solzhenitsyn made an observation about human nature that I think captures what this consuming, unquenchable fire will do. He wrote, "if only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

Which of us can truthfully claim to be all wheat and no chaff?

Solzhenitsyn, of course, viewed the rooting out of evil from in amongst the good within as beyond our capabilities; but it's not beyond Jesus, and that is what this consuming, unquenchable, recreating fire of forgiveness and repentance can do.

John the Baptist casts an impossible vision of transformation and a new way of being God's people. People who are distinctly different than any other people; who express their love and faith in God by working to heal the wounds caused by poverty and oppression, by letting their faith inform their economic and political choices, because matters of injustice and economy are matters of faith, too.

It does sound like a beautiful, impossible vision for us. It sounds like something we have to wait for, something that will come, someday, when Christ comes again, in keeping with the waiting of the Advent season.

But with Jesus' power and presence, with the new life made possible by Christ for us, it's a vision that we can all participate in now, today – no waiting – as the unquenchable, consuming fire of God's love burns through each one of us and reveals the person, the people – his people – that God created us to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.