

“Unquenchable Fire” GPPC 12-13-15
Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 3:7-18

Last Sunday we heard John proclaim “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.” This week Luke says the crowds come out to John to be baptized by him. And John says to the crowds, “You bunch of baby snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” And after this, John was disinvited from the Christmas party and unfriended from Facebook.

What in the world is going on with John? One moment he’s telling people to come for baptism. The next moment he’s calling them nasty names for showing up. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” “Um. You did, John.” And you have to hand it to him; when John cusses you, he gets his money’s worth. Calling somebody a baby snake. That’s creative. I like it. He makes the Grinch seem not so bad, doesn’t he?

Why is John so mad? He’s mad because of a terrible mistake he sees God’s people making. He knows they’re capable of so much better.

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So he tries to get their attention by raising his voice and throwing down threats, but he ends finally with a promise.

What specifically is the problem that's gotten John so riled up? He says, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Don't start saying to yourselves, 'Look at us. We're children of Abraham' Big deal! God can take these stones and make children of Abraham." John is upset that the people are misunderstanding and misapplying their heritage. They're saying, "Hey, we're descendants of Abraham. We are holy people simply by means of our birth." But John says, "You people need to spend less time surfing ancestry.com and more time actually doing something fruitful for God with your lives." Thus, John has moved from fussing at a first century crowd to meddling with our 21st century lives.

We say to God, "I grew up in the church. My family's been an important part of the congregation. I'm not active now, but I used to be." And God says, "What are you doing to serve me now?" We say, "I used to pray, take part in worship, Christian education, mission, and grow as a follower of Christ." And God says, "How are you growing right now?" We say, "I confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and that's

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enough.” And God says, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” As John puts it so intensely, “Trees that don’t bear fruit are chopped down and tossed into the fire.” In other words, ancestry gets you nowhere. If you’re not serving God with your life then you’re wasting your life; you’re burning a hole in your life; you’re flunking life.

Lo and behold, John’s insults and threats get the crowds’ attention.

Do they get our attention too?

The crowds’ ask, “What then should we do?”

And John becomes more specific. “If you have two coats, share one. And if you have food, share with people who don’t have food.” In other words, to be faithful to God, we’re expected to share and be generous, not stingy. Generosity is not something tacked on to the Christian faith by a bunch of soft-headed do-gooders. No. Generosity stands at the center of our faith, something commanded by hard-nosed, drill sergeant John. Are you reading me?

Then Luke says two other groups of people also show up. First, are the tax collectors. You may remember the tax collectors were often Jews themselves who worked for the ruthless, occupying Roman Empire.

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They were paid a standard salary, but frequently skimmed extra money from the population. Imagine another country taking over the U.S. and then having U.S. citizens collect taxes and pocket extra for themselves. There's a job that'll make you popular.

The tax collectors ask, "What should we do?" And John says, "Collect only what's prescribed for you. No more taking extra money to line your own pockets." John doesn't tell them to stop collecting taxes; he tells them not to shake down the people to get extra money for themselves.

Then there's a second group made up of soldiers who ask, you guessed it, "What should we do?" And John says, "Don't extort money by threats or lies. Be satisfied with your wages." Again, he doesn't tell them to quit being soldiers. He tells them to be honest soldiers.

What should we do? John's answer to the crowds boils down to two things, doesn't it? (1) Be generous, not stingy. (2) Do your work with fairness and integrity.

William Diehl was manager of sales for Bethlehem Steel for thirty-two years—a position of tremendous responsibility and power. He was

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also a Christian, a Lutheran who was active in his church. Unfortunately, he says he found that what he learned and experienced on Sunday mornings provided little guidance and sustenance for what he did during the work week. In response, he wrote a book entitled, *The Monday Connection: On Being an Authentic Christian in a Weekday World*. (It would make a wonderful study or Sunday School class here.) As Diehl says he explores “five types of Christian ministry in daily life: the ministries of competency, presence, ethics, change, and values.” He also titled a couple of chapters, “The Need to Give,” and “Living on the Low Side.”

Doesn't this sound a lot like what John is calling for?

To be a follower of Christ does not mean having to spend every waking moment at the church or having to be professionally employed by the church. But it does mean spending our lives doing things that help make the world a better place, bearing fruit in our lives, doing things that are productive for God's kingdom.

School teachers came and said, “What should we do?” And John said, “Prepare your lesson plans carefully. Keep growing as a teacher.

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Challenge your students without crushing them. Respect them without kowtowing to their every whim.”

Nurses and doctors came and said, “What should we do?” And John said, “Know your medicine, but never forget to listen carefully to your patients.”

Preachers came and said, “What should we do?” And John said, “You’re hopeless. Forget it.” Kidding. He said, “Balance your time in ministry with preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and administration. Comfort and challenge the people and yourself.”

Political leaders came and said, “What should we do?” And John said, “Don’t be a bully. Use your power to protect the weak and vulnerable. Don’t use your position to attack entire religions or groups of people. Bring the people together. Work for the common good.”

Retirees came and said, “What should we do?” And John said, “Enjoy your retirement relaxing, but also be generous with your time, energy, and money making the world a better place.”

What should we do? Wherever we are in life, whatever we’re doing, we are to be generous and act with fairness and integrity.

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But being the imperfect people we are, that's easier said than done, isn't it? Being people who make mistakes, sinners, it may seem overwhelming. So at last John moves from threats to God's good promise.

The people are coming to John and wondering if he might be the long-awaited Messiah who will bring in Israel's glory days and God's peace upon the world. John says, "Don't be confused. I'm baptizing you with water, but the one who is coming is more powerful than I. Christ is so much greater, I'm not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. It's as though Christ has a barn full of wheat. He's keeping the wheat, but burning away the chaff with unquenchable fire."

The promise, says John, is that God is coming in Christ to judge us. Christ is coming to reveal and affirm what is good and useful in us, the wheat, but also to burn away what is useless in us, the chaff. Christ is coming with the fire of the Spirit to empower us to live more faithful lives, lives of generosity, fairness, and integrity. And Christ is coming to transform us into the people we are meant to be.

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A few years ago I read an article by Lorna Simmons Nolt, a former nurse turned writer. She told about working in the 1950s at Philadelphia State Hospital, a hospital for folks suffering from mental illness. Especially she remembered one man, an 18-year-old named Barney. Barney had been diagnosed as being in a catatonic schizophrenic state. She says, "Barney spent most of his days in the day room of one of the buildings housing severely ill, retrogressed patients. He sat in one position, rigidly, with his feet on the floor, and rocked back and forth. He looked up only occasionally when we talked to him, his eyes flashing fear, but he never responded. And he never, ever talked." Nolt says Barney was one of a few patients who was receiving electroshock therapy. One day she says, "Barney was led into the special electroshock room and restrained lightly on a special gurney. He didn't resist. His expression didn't change, he didn't seem to realize what was happening to him. And he certainly didn't talk. The electrodes were attached, the shock was administered and, as his convulsions weakened, an amazing change in Barney occurred instantaneously."

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"His mouth opened, he sat up, he looked directly at the psychiatrist who was his doctor, and he said, tears streaming down his face, 'Don't ever give up on me, Doc! Please remember that I'm always in here somewhere. Don't ever stop trying to help me. Please! Promise me!'"

And so it is that we live in hope that the unquenchable fire of judgment is God's promise never to give up on us. Burning away the chaff and leaving the wheat. Burning with fire that empowers us to serve. God comes with unquenchable fire. Because that fire is the unquenchable fire of love. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal