

John the Baptist can come off like an old-fashioned parent who tells a crying child, “Keep that up and I’ll give you something to cry about!” But this is one of those passages where we tend to reject the message because we aren’t familiar with the historical and cultural context of the Gospel, or because someone once interpreted the message to us in an ungracious way. So it bears mentioning that not only do we read texts, or have them read to us, in a sense, a text can also read us.

Bear with me for a little context. The first part of this Gospel passage sounds especially scary. “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.” But that was just standard agricultural practice, nothing punitive. For fruitful trees, it was actually good news, for they would be protected from whatever was afflicting the others. Likewise, separating wheat from chaff was normal, not scary, and chaff was disposed of matter-of-factly, not with any attitude of contempt, anger, or punishment. And John the Baptist talks about that separation in the context of baptism and sanctification, so we can interpret those words as a hopeful message that God will cleanse us of the unhealthy elements within us, than as something to fear.

Advent is a season of hope, so we might hope that the fire John speaks of is holy, purifying fire, that God would use to purify sinful people, not to destroy them. I’m reminded of the prophet Ezekiel assuring his audience, twice, that God does not desire the death of sinners, but rather their repentance, and I’m reminded that God gets what God wants in the end. I’m reminded of the pillar of holy fire that kept Israel safe by night, and the tongues of holy fire that signified the arrival of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. And while John the Baptist was starting with an image from nature, he goes on to talk about unquenchable fire, which is not part of the natural world. Maybe he does mean hellfire, but we have good reasons to interpret his prophecy in a gracious light.

So if we hear John’s words as bad news, as condemnation, that says more about us than it does about the text. As people who come to the Thursday morning Bible study know by now, one of my pet peeves is when people choose to interpret a text in a harsh way, and then claim that the text requires them to be harsh. No, it doesn’t. And the text certainly doesn’t force anyone to act in a harsh way. But to be charitable, people who do that aren’t always trying to put one over on someone; more often, they are repeating the harsh ideas that were instilled in them, perhaps traumatically. Encounters with such people can be upsetting, but we can manage our reaction with our own graciousness.

By the same token, John the Baptist’s message is so intense, so ardent, that even now, hearing his message might make us feel guilty, ashamed, or inadequate; they are certainly common feelings, for our culture constantly tells us that we need to conform, obey, and buy, and the purveyors of these messages aren’t above using fear to make them stick. But we can choose to give our attention to God’s message, which is one of hope; the coming of a savior should be cause for rejoicing.

And that seems to be how John the Baptist's original audience heard his message. That would certainly explain why St. Luke describes John's message as "good news." And the crowd's reaction is worth considering in part simply because they were closer to the messenger than we are. St. Luke tells us that some of John's audience were tax collectors and soldiers, which is really interesting when you remember they were basically the face of the Roman occupation. They were collaborators, despised for exploiting their own countrymen for personal gain. They were the last people one might have expected to listen to John the Baptist, for they had made a pact with the Empire to hurt people, economically or physically, for their own gain.

So why were they listening to John the Baptist? Perhaps the better question is, how were they listening? Were they merely seeking entertainment? Were they there to mock a purveyor of virtue or a religious lunatic? Were they hostile, and hoping to catch him saying something they could use against him? Apparently not, for not only were they listening, they were asking him, "What should we do?" Perhaps they had heard the excitement of the people about the idea that God was going to intervene, bringing wrath to the oppressor and joyful, liberating redemption to the oppressed, and they knew only too well that they were the oppressor. Perhaps they remembered their Bible and its lessons, and were starting to feel uncomfortable about the lives they had chosen.

So we can read their reading. Perhaps they asked with a radical openness, knowing that John could have told them to do something treasonous, or set an impossibly high standard for them. If so, they must have breathed a sigh of relief at John's answer — this in itself was good news. Perhaps they asked with an edge, doubting that John's vision could ever be practical, skeptical that anything they could do would make a difference under the seemingly all-powerful Empire. If so, they must have marveled at the connection John made between simple changes to their own behavior and the cosmic intervention of God in the arrival of a powerful Messiah. Yet either way, just because they engaged and asked the question, we can infer that they wanted to live better lives.

What about us, though? Do we want to live better lives? Just as much as the world tells us we aren't good enough to be loved, it also tells us that we're perfect just the way we are. The world sometimes feeds our narcissism, appeals to our vanity, tries to fool us into refusing to do the things that promise to make us better people. Those two approaches seem to be contradictory, but they have the same dark end: separating us from the love of God.

The Church's message is very different. She teaches that, yes, sin and brokenness are real problems. Like a brood of vipers, sin and brokenness cause problems far beyond themselves. But much more important is the Church's teaching that God loves us unconditionally, and God's love is proactive. "The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head."

Jesus, whom John the Baptist foretold, is God's love made flesh, in order to free us from sin and death. They will not get the last word. God defeats evil, completely and finally. God cuts down the diseased trees that threaten us and God longs to separate the wheat from the chaff in our souls, rejoicing in the wheat and blowing the chaff away. So God is not just ready, but determined, to heal us, regardless of how we came by our wounds.

However, we need to understand how God's love works, how God's grace comes to us because love, by definition, can't force itself upon us. Therefore, the risk of being so closed off to God's love that we reject it entirely is real. That's why Advent church is so important, why Advent season is so important, why prophets like John the Baptist are so important: they offer us the opportunity to examine our lives and let go of what's weighing down our souls, the opportunity to reorient ourselves to be ready for the salvation that God is sending us, the opportunity to experience God's grace right now.

So while this is all good news, it's OK if after hearing it you don't feel particularly joyful, if you're worried, stressed out, or worse. If you're not feeling great, I want to help you, so please, reach out and we can set up a time to talk. In addition, starting today, Deacon Joe will be offering healing prayer immediately after church; just meet him at the altar rail. Take heart, for our savior is near, coming with healing in his wings. Even if you aren't in a rejoicing mood, God will give us something to rejoice about.