

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, December 13, 2015

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength
and my might;
he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
And you will say on that day:
Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among
the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord,
for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout aloud and sing for joy,
O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the
Holy One of Israel.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Luke 3:7-18

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 food 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.

Let us pray...Amen.

Separating wheat from chaff. When we boil down today's gospel lesson from Luke, the main theme is about separating the wheat from the chaff.

The wheat berry, the fruit of the wheat plant, must be separated from the stalk and husks on the plant in order to be useful. Threshing causes the heavier wheat berries to fall to the bottom, while the chaff, the waste, is lighter, and falls more to the top.

Panning for gold uses the same idea, the heavier gold sinks to the bottom of a pan of water, the stones and sand flow by...

All our lives, we've been taught to separate the good from the bad, the useful from the useless, the safe from the dangerous.

For good or for ill, we learn very early on about trying to pick the good over the bad.

I may have been only 5 or 6 when the kids in my neighborhood let me line up to play tag football. The two oldest kids declared themselves captains, and proceeded to pick teams, one player at a time. Perhaps you've been through a similar experience. The captains keep picking until no one is left. But if you are one of the last standing, it makes for some anxious moments.

The captains want the best team, so they try and pick the best players first, leaving everybody to assume that the last players picked are the worst players.

College admission, job interviews, hiring a plumber or carpenter, we're either trying to pick the best, or trying to be the best.

This morning's gospel lesson begins with John the Baptist in the wilderness. The crowds were getting bigger, more and more people were heading out into the wilderness to be baptized by John, the one who was sent to prepare the way.

John's message to the crowd was this: bear fruits worthy of repentance. But they didn't understand what he meant. They asked, what should we do?

He said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food 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."

People feared that the end of the world was near. John was talking about the Messiah, who was coming soon, and everybody feared the worst, that the Messiah would come and hold the faithful accountable for their lives, would judge them worthy or unworthy.

This whole concept of separating wheat from chaff has been interpreted as separating good people from bad people, and I think this is a mistake. I believe there are no bad people. Only bad behavior.

The separating of the wheat and the chaff that John the Baptist is speaking of is about God's faithful children separating the fruits of the spirit from the chaff of our own lives, not about picking a team from only the good people. And certainly not about pointing our fingers at others and calling them bad.

The separating of the wheat from the chaff is about preparing the way for the Christ Child in our own hearts, in our own spirits, in our own lives. It's about sharing our resources, living within our means, doing our jobs. What gets cleared on the threshing floor are the behaviors and attitudes that do not produce fruits worthy of repentance.

Imagine, for a moment, taking a personal inventory of your life. Imagine listing the fruits your life brings to the world, your gifts, your joys, the unique energy that is at the heart of who you are. And then imagine listing the chaff in your life, the stuff that is dry, and useless, the stuff that is

mostly waste. The fruits we can celebrate, the chaff we offer up to be burned in the unquenchable fire.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord for the first time. Now it's up to you and me to prepare the way of the Lord, and one of the best ways to prepare our souls for the Christ Child is to winnow out the fruits, to separate out the wheat from the chaff.

In these times, anything we can do to promote hope, peace, love, and joy, not to mention forgiveness, generosity, compassion and tolerance, will make the world a better place.

Yup, you heard me right: in the face of national or international tragedies, the work we do in separating the wheat from the chaff in our own lives can have an immediate and powerful impact on the world. The work we do to promote hope, peace love and joy will immediately reduce the amount of hatred, bitterness, fear and selfishness. We are neither helpless nor hopeless when it comes to preparing the way of the Lord in our lives. We have all the tools necessary: a soul, faith, the ability to look inside ourselves.

For too long, this passage and others like it have been used to suggest that some people go to heaven, and others do not. At worst, they have been used to suggest that only a small fraction of Christians will be accepted into heaven, with the majority of humanity facing the quenching fire.

That's not how I see it. I see this as a call for God's children to ask yet again, in these difficult and violent times, what should we do? And the faithful answer will always be: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food 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."

Of course, this was written when tax collectors and soldiers had a particularly difficult place in society at the time. Tax collectors and soldiers made their living extorting their neighbors beyond the Roman taxes, by threatening violence if they did not receive additional funds. I'm not suggesting that any of us are doing these things, but I am suggesting that we can apply the idea of doing our jobs with causing harm, without demanding extra from those we serve. Seeing the bigger picture as to how society benefits when we look out for others first.

Look, by the standards set forth by John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul, and Jesus, being a Christian is no easy task. Being a Christian at Christmas time is nearly impossible!

But each year, around this time, we contemplate what it means to have the son of God born into the world. The Lord and Savior we follow, the Prince of Peace. Every year we hear from our scriptures how every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain laid low, the rough places plain...

That's us, doing the work of separating the wheat from the chaff in our own souls, in our own lives. That's us, following Jesus. That's us, asking 'what shall we do?'

The crowds feared the end of the world. The coming Messiah was going to judge everybody as worthy or unworthy, and no one wanted to be left behind for the quenching fire. Then the Christ Child was born; he wasn't that kind of Messiah at all. Not what the faithful expected.

Jesus will be born into this world yet again, and it will be with our help. With our separating the wheat from the chaff, we will prepare the way of the Lord. We can do this. We will be the hope, the peace, the love, and joy that the world needs, and we will show the world that we can discard the fear, the hate, the suspicion, and the self-interest as just so much chaff, fuel for the unquenchable fire. We will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted, and stand up for those who have no voice. It's what we do. Amen.