

## Epiphany 1C 2022 Sermon

### *Isaiah 43:1-2*

*Thus says the LORD,  
 he who created you, O Jacob,  
 he who formed you, O Israel:  
 Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
 I have called you by name, you are mine.  
 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
 when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
 and the flame shall not consume you.*

### *Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

*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."*

*Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

John the Baptist says to the crowds who have come to be baptized: "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."

Now, I don't know about you, but after hearing today's Gospel passage, what sticks with me is that last part – the threatening part; the part about God burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. It's a frightening image! It makes one wonder, "Am *I* wheat, or am I the chaff that God will burn with unquenchable fire when I die?" A Mennonite pastor notes, "It's the stuff of nightmares: a big, burly farmer-god throwing people into the air with a pitchfork, then burning alive the ones that come back down into the wrong pile."<sup>1</sup>

Now, I think that such an image of a God who burns people with unquenchable fire can do two things: first, it can make people frightened of God – the very God who loved the world so much that he gave his only-begotten son for your sake and for mine. How can we trust that God is merciful and forgiving, how can we have a loving, open and vulnerable relationship with God if God is the kind of God who would burn a human soul with unquenchable fire? One response, then,

to this image of God that John the Baptist depicts, is fear, a fear which causes a person to draw back from God, not nearer.

A second response people might have regarding this picture of a God who punishes human souls with unquenchable fire is to stop believing in God entirely – or at least, stop believing in a religion that believes in such a God. I truly think, my friends, that this is one reason that so many people are rejecting Christianity or the Church these days: they simply cannot believe in, cannot *trust* in, a God who would burn people with unquenchable fire. And, insofar as people believe that this image of a punishing and murderous God is the image held by all Christians, it's understandable that they would reject Christianity.

Now, those of you who have heard me preach and teach down through the years know that I take the Bible seriously. I believe that the Bible can have many layers of meaning that are not always obvious on the surface. And so, let me suggest two alternative perspectives on this passage about John the Baptist and his fiery words – alternative perspectives that I believe are faithful ways of interpreting and understanding this Gospel text.

The first approach I would suggest is to re-interpret the symbolism that John uses. What if the “chaff” that John the Baptist speaks about isn't human souls, but rather our human sins and faults, our ego “junk,” our self-centeredness and unforgiveness and lack of compassion? The fire Jesus will bring will be not a *punishing*, but a **purifying**, fire, that burns away those parts of us that are “chaff” and need to go: our sinful tendencies, our false selves, our ego-centered selves, our vindictive selves, our selfish selves. In a verse from today's first hymn, God says to us:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.  
The flame shall not hurt thee; *I only design*  
*thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*<sup>2</sup>

That image comes straight from the Book of Isaiah, where we read:

*Thus says the LORD,*  
*he who created you...:*  
*I have called you by name, you are mine.*  
*...when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,*  
*and the flame shall not consume you. (Isaiah 43:1-2)*

The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross – chaff – to consume, and thy gold – our True Selves, created in the image and likeness of God – to refine.

Seen from this interpretive perspective, then, “chaff” is not “bad people,” but rather the “dross,” the “junk” of our lives, which **needs** to be burned away, in order for our True Selves, our “gold,” to emerge.

But there's another interpretive perspective that addresses the difficulty we may have with the image of God that John the Baptist portrays in today's Gospel. John Shea writes:

“[John the Baptist] correctly understands that he is not the Messiah but the forerunner of one mightier than himself. He must learn from that one, for he is not fit to loosen his sandal strap. This attitude of learning from the One Who Is to Come will be important, for **what John envisions will not be what will come about.**” What John envisions will *not* be what will come about.

Dr. Shea continues: “John [the Baptist] foresees a baptism in ‘the Holy Spirit and fire.’ But **he mistakenly assumes this Holy Spirit and fire means judgment and destruction.** ...

“However, when Jesus comes, he will be the source of the Holy Spirit and fire in a quite *different* way [than what John envisions]. He will connect people to God so that the Holy Spirit can work *through* them to such a degree that people will see their ‘good works and give glory to [their] Father in heaven’ (Matt 5:16). This Holy Spirit will inspire and direct their lives, providing the *commitment* to carry out John’s agenda of reform. The Holy Spirit is the spiritual energy to *share* with others and not oppress them. **This** is the fire [what the Prophet Malachi (3:2-3) calls a ‘refiner’s fire’] that both purifies every moral effort and provides the passion to persevere. It is a fire that burns without burning out, the fire of the bush that *energized* Moses in his relentless efforts to free the people from slavery (Exodus 3:2).”<sup>3</sup>

Moses’ burning bush was not *destroyed* by the fire; instead, that burning bush became a source, not of destruction, but of inspiration and passion and energy to empower and sustain Moses for the mission on which God was sending him.

My friends, I would venture to guess that a large *majority* of people who have read today’s Gospel passage down through the centuries have believed that John the Baptist’s words are coming directly from God, and that the “chaff” of which he speaks is all those human souls that won’t make it to heaven when they die. That’s what **I** had always believed, in my younger years. But what if that is **not** the case? What if John’s understanding of a **separating** Spirit and a **destructive** fire is *wrong*?

We can find support for this perspective later in Luke’s Gospel, when John the Baptist, having been imprisoned by Herod, sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, John doesn’t quite get it! He isn’t sure whether Jesus is the One whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. John *thinks* that the Messiah is going to come with a winnowing fork in his hand and burn up all the bad people, but that is *not* what **Jesus** does; so John questions whether Jesus really **is** the Messiah. After all, Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors and forgives adulterers – **not** the kind of

winnowing-fork-Messiah John had envisioned! Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "...among those born of women no one is greater than John [the Baptist]; yet the *least* in the kingdom of God is greater than [John]."<sup>5</sup> The *least* in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. For John's mindset is **not** a kingdom-of-God mindset; it is a mindset of judgment and punishment – which is the mindset of this world, *not* the kingdom of God, not the reign of God.

So, if John's message of separation, judgment, and punishment gets it *wrong*, what **is** God's message for us in today's Gospel story? What is the Good News? I would suggest that, rather than focusing on *John's* **threatening** words, which tend to hook and grasp our attention, we focus instead on the words which come to Jesus from heaven: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" It is because of **these** words that we read this passage on this first Sunday after the Epiphany. **These** words are the epiphany, the revelation, which exposes the true nature of Jesus' relationship with God the Father: a relationship characterized by love and favor. And, my friends, I firmly believe that these words from heaven are spoken to **us**, also, for they are the very meaning of our **own** baptism. And so, today as you renew your baptismal vows and are sprinkled with Holy Water, the water of baptism, hear that same voice from heaven – from God – speaking directly to you: "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

AMEN

1 "About that Baptism by Fire..." Joanna Harader, *The Christian Century*, December 19, 2018, [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-13-baptism-c-luke-315-17-21-22-acts-814-17-0?utm\\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=a68c2b005d-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2018\\_09\\_11\\_08\\_32\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b00cd618da-a68c2b005d-82352811](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-13-baptism-c-luke-315-17-21-22-acts-814-17-0?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=a68c2b005d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_09_11_08_32_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-a68c2b005d-82352811)

2 *Hymnal 1982* #636, #637

3 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 12

4 Luke 7:19

5 Luke 7:28