*“The Winnower”*

*A sermon for The Feast of The Baptism of Christ*

*By Rev. Rachel Wildman*

*St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, January 9th, 2022*

I decided that rather than *reading* this morning’s Gospel passage as my first task in sermon preparation, I would *listen* to it via my audio bible. Not surprisingly, given the rather excessive nature of the acting, I was taken aback even more than usual by John the Baptist’s promise that Jesus, *through baptism*, was coming to separate the wheat from the chaff and to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire!

As a good mainline protestant, I typically regard John’s talk of unquenchable fire—the JUDGEMENT that Jesus would bring-- as most likely a failed human interpretation of the calls of both the Incarnation and baptism…but this year, John’s promise as proclaimed by my very dramatic audio bible actor wouldn’t let me go…

So, I was very grateful to consult one of my favorite bible commentaries and find a bit about just what it was John had in mind[[1]](#footnote-1)…and let me tell you, wheat harvesting is fascinating, especially when applied as a metaphor for our invitation to baptism and Jesus’ work of JUDGEMENT! So, this morning, we are going to spend some time in the “weeds” of wheat harvesting…Bad wheat pun…sorry…

When wheat harvesting is done manually, there are three parts to it—reaping, threshing, and winnowing…In the reaping, the wheat plant is cut off its stalk, but, as with all harvesting, this is only done when the wheat is in the final stage of its growing process…when it’s exterior is relatively dry—golden rather than green.

Once it has been cut, it’s gathered and brought to the threshing floor. Here, on this hard ground, the wheat plant is pounded with whatever heavy things are around…often rocks.

This pounding, or threshing, loosens the wheat grain, itself, from the chaff, which is the protective, golden, dried case around the seed.

Once the pounding has been done, then the winnowing happens (enter Jesus into our metaphor)…For the winnowing, it must be windy—a gentle wind is best—and a winnowing fork is used…this giant fork throws the piles of intermingled seed and chaff into the air, and in the gentle wind, the light and golden chaff is blown to the side, while the heavier seed drops to the floor. The seeds—the grains-- are then ready to be gathered and prepared for eating, while the chaff is burned into ash, which is then used to fertilize the soil for next year’s wheat crop.

I know…you are probably bored *hearing* this rather than seeing it…I wanted to show you some *photos* of the harvesting process, but they were all grainy……hee hee…..Another bad wheat pun….I couldn’t help myself….

Actually, there are some very clear, un-grainy, videos and photos of this whole process, and I have to say, seeing it come alive opened me to Jesus’ role as winnower in “The Judgment”…in fact, it didn’t just open me, it actually attracted me!

I know…I know…but, the images I immersed myself in of grain falling, solidly and determinedly to the floor while the chaff danced away in the wind, and then the fire, burning bright…were deeply moving. As I watched, and then paused in contemplation, the words that came to mind were not cold and uncaring—fearsome or foreboding--but instead, deeply attractive…words like sift…clarify...simplify…refine…

Judgment sounds so off-putting, especially when held up as the end-goal of baptism, but to me, these images revealed it so clearly as a process in which what can nourish the living is gathered up, and what was once protective, but is no longer needed, is transformed into something that can nourish life yet to come. In this powerful imagery, judgment is simply the process by which all things move to new life.

John describes the fire as unquenchable not to incite our fear, but instead, to illustrate that Jesus’ commitment to bringing about transformation is total…perpetual…never ending…In fact, in this process FEAR is among those things Jesus comes to burn up! …Fear is part of the exoskeleton that did protect us as we were growing, but which must blow away into the fire if we are to truly seed God’s radical love in the world around us.

With all that life is currently throwing at me, at us, I am so hungry for focus and simplicity…I am ravenous for a grand sifting of my obligations and the ability to perceive what coping mechanisms or ideas no longer serve me, so that God’s work for me lies so clearly in front of me that I can see just what it is.

I am, just as many of you are, just as hungry for that clarity as it applies to our common life—we are eager for a sifting of our common values and commitments and the processes and structures that support them, so that what is seed for our collective growth and thriving drops to the floor for us *all* to see clearly, and what we have outgrown or is brittle with overprotection is burned away, its ashen memory the fertilizer of repentance and determination that we need to move forward.

That’s what the winnowing fork, the wind, and the fire accomplish. If baptism is an assent to that process, then Bring. It. On.

I want to be very careful here not to sentimentalize this process…it is almost always uncomfortable…and very often even painful….but, you know what they say: NO PAIN NO GRAIN….Ok…sorry…again, I couldn’t resist.

But, in all seriousness, the process that begins with loosening the once protective exoskeletons that cover us, our relationships, even our institutions, and ends with only what we need to move forward is not an easy one. Life does some of the cutting and pounding, but we must also do a fair bit ourselves.

Thankfully, God has placed John the Baptists all around us to help us do that work. We have mental health professionals who can help us turn inward and begin to loosen the now-limiting coping mechanisms and self-understandings that our wonderfully protective minds gifted us years or decades back to get us through challenging situations…we have justice advocates who can help us loosen the limiting assumptions and building blocks of our collective systems and institutions that served to protect and nurture some of us, but at the expense of others of us…we have friends, family, co-workers, and one another, here in this church, who can help us loosen our fierce independence that still does protect us, but only if exercised alongside the beautiful, divine reality of our interdependence and vulnerability.

These John the Baptists can help us loosen our wheat from our chaffs, so that living the baptismal way of Jesus—the way of love—can toss us up into the air and separate the two…inviting us into a new life of simple, clear vision for what of God’s vast dream is ours to do, and in which all we have learned from and about the chaff is ash fertilizer for our future.

Our progressive, mainline church is often skittish about the chaff burning and the judgment…especially because they are so often thought of us as processes that are applied to whole persons …this person—a grain-- will be saved, and this other person—chaff-- will be sent to an eternal, fiery hell. But, I think John the Baptist’s own metaphor invites us to really question that interpretation….and I hope this sermon does the same.

The winnower is newly born among us. The fork, the wind, and the fire await. O Jesus, please… sift…clarify...simplify…refine…

AMEN.

1. #  Shively Smith, Commentary on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-315-17-21-22-5>, accessed 1/6/22

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)