

December 8, 2024

Second Sunday After Advent

“Good Fire”

Luke 3:1-14

John the Baptist is a very fierce preacher, but he is probably at his harshest here in Luke’s Gospel. Over in Matthew he only calls the Pharisees a brood of vipers; in Luke’s account he addresses the entire crowd this way! It’s fine though, because the title works for all people. By the work of the serpent in Eden all mankind fell into sin, thus “vipers” is applicable to all sinners. And John intends this to be harsh, for He is motivating folks to undergo a radical change.

*“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance,”* John says, and then speaks of how this people must be something other than good Jews, children of Abraham, in order to escape the coming judgment. He instructs them to change their behaviors toward justice, fairness and love of neighbor and later proclaims the coming of the Christ, saying: *“I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

This sounds very alarming as it should; there is nothing more terrifying than falling on the wrong side of the judgment of the Most High God; that is eternal condemnation. Yet the Gospel is here, and it’s actually right up front, before the judgment part: *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire...gather the wheat into his barn...”*

As Jesus told Nicodemus, *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* Not all fire is judgment. The fire Jesus brings with the gift of the Holy Spirit is the type God foretells through the prophet Malachi: *“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.”*

Refining fire is a good thing. It purifies. Not only that, it purifies that which is already considered valuable and precious! This is what Christ has done. This is the simple Gospel: Jesus came to take away our sins, to purify us and make us holy to God, because we are precious to Him. *“For God so loved the world...etc.”* Jesus has most certainly done this deed by His atoning sacrifice on the cross and His victorious resurrection as the first fruits of all who will be raised into His glory.

This is indeed good news. But don’t forget that John the Baptist still calls for a radical change in those who would rightly receive this Savior. Remember, John is harsh for a reason. He wants people to wake up from the old way of thinking and receive the new thing arriving in Christ.

*“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire”*...but what if one refuses to be refined by His fire? What if someone refuses to change, but instead holds on to the former way of life before Christ? It’s pretty obvious such a person isn’t going to be that wheat that gets gathered into His barn...and the only alternative is that other fire, the unquenchable one.

Therefore, yes, let this be alarming as John intended it to be. He wasn’t lying. True, I tend to believe that the gentle, suffering servant Messiah of Jesus of Nazareth wasn’t quite the type of Messiah John was expecting. But although Jesus didn’t bring the unquenchable fire of judgment

the first time around, He certainly preached a lot about it coming in His teaching and parables. John was not wrong.

So, therefore, be radically changed.

Scary message isn't it? We don't like change. It causes stress. Plus, the most obvious change to undergo in this context is to stop sinning...and we don't have a stellar track record at that. So what do we do?

Well first off I would say accept that you have been changed already. You believe. You stand baptized. You receive the body and blood of Christ in faith. You stand changed before God by His grace alone. You stand forgiven, thus pure and holy before God. Trust this. Trust His Word of grace. Springing from that Gospel truth then, be willing and even eager to be refined!

Many Christians come before God in prayer asking forgiveness of their sins, and that is right and good. But that may be as far as it goes. One asks for forgiveness, knows Christ gives it, and then one proceeds to live life as usual, same-old same-old; not much change going on. I'm not talking about sinning here. I'm talking about our life simply being that—our life.

The Holy Spirit calls us to more than that. Our prayer in the morning should be more than just "forgive me, Jesus." It should also be, "refine me, Jesus." St. Paul writes *"I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."* We have been radically changed by Christ to be His work, His vessel, His temple. Knowing and trusting this, our goal each and every day is to better become what He has made us to be. Jesus has accomplished yet is still performing a great work of your salvation for eternity. Our goal is to align with that, with the will of our Lord for us always.

The challenge is to resist the worldly nature that wants to remain worldly, to resist being refined, to say, "But it's my life, not yours." And yes, we all do this as we stumbling in sin again and again. But the chaff gets comfortable there with the dross of sin and rebellious self-rule. The wheat sees their folly and mournfully prays "Forgive me, Jesus. Refine me, Jesus."

People went out to John in the wilderness for a very clear reason; he was *"proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* The people wanted to be changed. They desired to be refined, made holy in the forgiveness of their sins.

Although we stand baptized in the forgiveness of Christ, our desire to be changed, to be conformed to Him, to be refined endures. It's part of saving faith. Do not dread it or resist it. Embrace it and pursue it, because this is the very fire of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ has brought you as a gift.

Joyfully stand in the good work Christ has begun in you. Eagerly be refined in Him each day as He brings all thing to completion in Himself. Each day pray, "Forgive me, Jesus. Refine me, Jesus." And look forward to what He shall do.

Amen.