



Ooooh–That Burns! Touchpoint for 12/12/2018

Luke 3:7-18 [NRSV]

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.

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Bear fruit that befits repentance...whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none and whoever has food must do likewise...Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you...and be satisfied with your wages...”

Our preparation for Christmas continues with John the Baptist. Last week we heard Luke locate the presence of John and the coming of Christ in relation to 7 historical leaders. Two of which would play prominently in John’s beheading, and four of which would be responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Luke’s readers know this when they read his gospel.

Luke isn’t just interested in giving historical facts. He is interested in presenting a contrast. Luke starts out by locating the story of John and Jesus in world history, but then turns it around and says that the history of the world needs to be located in and interpreted in light of the story of John and Jesus. After all, by the time Luke’s readers read his Gospel, Tiberius, Herod, Pilate and the rest are all dead, and the Christ and his community are still very much alive.

For Luke, Jesus doesn’t just come into the world, he takes the world into himself. It is quite a stunning reversal. I was always taught in seminary and beyond, to interpret Jesus in the context of the times. Luke seems to be saying that we should interpret our world and lives in the context of the risen Christ.

This seems to be the point of John’s words. Yes, he starts with accusation and condemnation, but moves on to some very basic stuff of living a redeemed life, a life in the context of being a child of God. Now, instead of running from John and his words, the crowds ask in almost simplistic terms, “Then what should we do?”

Now this is a question we Lutherans often shy away from. We are so afraid of anything turning into works righteousness that we run from any thought or statement of action on our part. But John isn't trying to tell people how to get in good with God. He's telling them what it looks like to live in the new reality. A reality in which the Mystery is King, so to speak, and not Herod or Tiberius or Pilate.

And how does John say to live? Well, it is humanity 101. Christianity 101. It could have been written by Robert Fulgham since everything he needed to know he learned in kindergarten.

To the poor crowds he says "Share." To the tax collectors he says "Be fair." To the soldiers he says "Don't bully." Whatever happened to believe, pray, give praise, meditate and contemplate? Whatever happened to "set your mind on heavenly things?" It is so down to earth. So basic. So practical. It's sooooo unspiritual. Or maybe it's just trying to tell me that spirituality is not an escape from this world but a movement, a dive into it. Maybe it's just trying to tell me that the spiritual and the physical are not two separate things but intimately connected, and repentance isn't an individual and personal morality play, but a relational reality.

This text drives us back into the world in which we live, not away from it. And so I must admit, this passage bothers me. I have spent years of my life reading and meditating on the faith life. I live at a Retreat Center where I can devote myself to reading, contemplation and prayer. On top of that, I am an introvert. I find much connection with that bumper sticker that reads, "The more people I know, the more I like my dog" and I don't even have a dog! And so when I read this passage and others like it that emphasize the physicality of spirituality, it makes me want to scream out at God, "Look God, if you're so adamant about our spirituality being physical then why don't you become a human being and try it? Oh, wait, never mind."

When I was much younger—much, much younger—I wanted to be very religious. I even tried wearing a cross for a while but since I have sensitive skin it created a rash on my chest, so I stopped because I didn't see why my faith and bearing a cross should cause me discomfort.

It was then I moved into my "I'm spiritual just not religious phase." That one stayed with me for a while. But I have to tell you, this last year in particular, spending time with the Gospel of Mark and now Luke, I can't even say that anymore. This passage, along with the gospel of Mark, drive me into the world and a relationship with others. The fruits that befit repentance are not tied to social moral values, or even believing in Jesus. There is nothing spiritual about them. Christianity is very much tied to this world and our place in it.

Spirituality is not an escape from this world but a movement, a dive into it. The spiritual and the physical are not two separate things but intimately connected, and repentance isn't an individual and personal morality play, but a relational reality. I think it's time for me to stop saying "I'm spiritual, just not religious" and start saying, "I'm physical, just not religious."

And so when John speaks to the crowd about fruits that befit repentance he doesn't give spiritual advice. He doesn't become a spiritual director or faith mentor, OUCH! What John is basically saying is, "Don't use your position to take advantage of other people." Really?!? Doesn't John know what the point of capitalism is? That's what our whole economy is based on. "Context John! Context! We live in America!"

And maybe that is the whole point of Luke's gospel and John's message to us in 2018. Yes, we do live in America! But we also live in something greater. We live within the Kingdom of God. We live and move and have our being within the Mystery which is far greater than any human made government, which is far greater than any lines drawn in the sand or fortified walls that seek to separate us. And no, we don't need to leave this country or anywhere to be a part of the kingdom of God and live within the Mystery.

It is quite remarkable that when John is talking to the tax collectors he doesn't tell them to leave their jobs. He doesn't tell the mercenary soldiers to take up pacifism. He doesn't tell the poor it's their fault. He doesn't tell the despised riff-raff and low-lives of their day to take a hike. He tells them to live out the new reality right where they find themselves. He includes them within the Kingdom and says they have their place and can bear fruit, right where they are. And if they can be included, then who can't! Apparently, when Luke quotes Isaiah that "ALL flesh shall see the salvation of God" he means it.

You see, on one level, living in the reality of the kingdom need not be heroic. Wherever we find ourselves is where we are called to bear fruit that befits repentance. And right now I find that very "Good News." Because, I must confess I feel very weary some days with this country, this culture, this society. Some days I want to contact my friends in Japan or Thailand and ask if it would be ok for me to come over and live in a hut on a rice paddy. It can seem so hard to know what to do in the face of constant division and hatred of the other, and one can feel so helpless. So that is why the Baptist's words to simply 'bloom where you're planted' come as good news.

And I also know it's not so simple as blaming others. I, too, am a product of this society and have contributed to it in ways both good and bad. I would love to be like John the Baptist and simply call everyone else a 'brood of vipers' but I am very well aware that I am them and they are me.

It would be nice to think that it is only those people who will be burned up by the unquenchable fire that John talks about. But Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it well when he wrote, *"If only it were so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."*

And so I need that unquenchable fire to burn in me. To burn away the chaff in me so that I can bear fruit that befits repentance. What I need is a continual baptism of water and fire, though frankly I would just prefer the water.

And so, as John says, it is not my place to flee from the wrath to come, but to open myself to it. For it is my only hope. My hope is in the Mystery who will not settle for anything less than a transformed me, a death and resurrected me. My hope is in a relentless God who will never give up on me. One who will meet me in my betrayals and denials and fear and cowardice and continue to feed me. One who will meet me in my betrayals and denials and continue to work in me.

One who will come to me in the bread and wine of this meal, only this time, maybe with a little extra hot sauce, so that when I taste his presence I say to myself: "Ooooh, that burns!!!"

Amen.