

*Sermon for 3 Advent, Year C  
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson  
Holy Nativity, Plano  
17 December, 2006*

Our Gospel reading this morning is a continuation of the one from last week. Last week we saw that God is blazing a path through the desert of our souls to save us. And all we have to do is repent and trust in him. But here in this reading, we actually get to hear John the Baptist preaching this repentance. At first glance, it doesn't sound like good news. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

This is the authentic voice of the prophet. It is the sort of thing that we might hear from any of the writing prophets in the Old Testament. And there is no getting around it. Our reading from Zephaniah is about the blessing that comes to God's servants. God "will rejoice over [Zion] with gladness, ... he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." But that is from the very end of the book of Zephaniah. But the whole rest of the book is about the great day of the Lord, "A day of wrath," a day of "ruin and devastation," "darkness and gloom," "clouds and thick darkness".

We tend to focus on the hopeful prophecies in the Bible. We love much of Isaiah, because it is comforting. But even Isaiah is at least half judgment and destruction. And Jeremiah and Ezekiel are worse. The pattern continues, more or less, through all the books of the prophets. All of them speak some sort of comfort to God's people, but it is based on God's promises, not what his people deserve. The entire book of Hosea is devoted to this theme. It's very comforting, as long as you don't mind being called a whore. Hosea marries a prostitute but remains faithful to her, just as God binds himself to an unfaithful people but continues to claim them as his own.

All of which is to say that it may be nice to stick to comforting passages of prophecy. But if we do, we will not truly be comforted. In order to claim the promises of God, we must also acknowledge the judgment of God on ourselves. And that judgment is found in the loving, truthful words of John the Baptist: "You brood of vipers!" Without Jesus, we are not the cute, cuddly, fuzzy beings we like other people to think we are. Nor are we strong and competent. In the most important things, we are vicious and venomous, spreading poison and death.

Parents ought to know this all too well. We know from experience how hard it is raise our children responsibly, how slowly they respond to our love and correction, and how easy it is to destroy days of work with a single moment of our own frustration and sin. We do so much damage by losing our temper once, and it takes days of patience just to make up for it. In the end, we all know that we damage our children. Even if we can't see what it is, we know the damage is done. And what is more obvious in the intensity of the parent-child relationship is just as true in all other relationships. It is easy and natural for us to tear each other down. It takes real work and inspiration to build each other up. We are naturally poisonous creatures, and we have to work against our natures to do good.

“But,” you say, “we are baptized, we come to church. What do you want for free?!” Be careful. The Jews couldn't rely on their descent from Abraham to save them. Neither can we rely on our position, or our birth, or mechanics of our membership in the church. “Even now,” John says, “the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is being cut down and thrown into the fire.” He is not speaking here of God's judgment on the gentiles. He is speaking of the judgment of God's people. He is speaking here of God's judgment on us.

I don't say any of this to insult you. I don't even say it to frighten you, although there is a healthy kind of fear that leads to wisdom. I say it simply because it is true. And if we don't understand who we are, if we don't understand what a stench of putrefaction we are in God's nostrils; we will never understand the amazing love of God poured out upon us. We will never understand what we owe to this God who redeems us at incalculable expense to himself.

If we wish to partake of God's comfort and salvation, we must go beyond the water baptism of John. We must allow Jesus to immerse us in the Holy Spirit and cleanse us by fire. Water simply washes dirt away. Fire consumes it. The image that John uses is from the wheat harvest. You cut down the wheat in the field and pile it up on the threshing floor. And then you thresh it, or beat it, to separate the actual grain from the chaff, the inedible stuff, like the stalks. After that, you take a big fork and toss it all in the air, so that the breeze will carry away the light chaff, but the heavy wheat will fall back to the floor. Then you gather up the grain and store it, but you burn up the chaff.

That's what Jesus does with us through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is called the Comforter, but he also winnows us, separating the chaff from the wheat, and completely destroying it. Until he's done, it's going to feel to us like that

chaff is still a part of us. And the destruction of my chaff *feels* as though God is actually burning me, rather than purifying me. When we actually turn to God, we submit ourselves to this process of purification, because Jesus has blazed the path, even though he didn't deserve it.

During this season of Advent, we prepare ourselves to meet Jesus with joy at his coming to judge the world. One of the ways we do that is to practice. St. Paul tells us, "Rejoice in the Lord always". But notice that rejoicing in the Lord requires repentance. This joy is predicated on sorrow for our sins. There is no way to have the joy without the sorrow. Without the Lord, we rejoice in our appetites, even though they never satisfy us. Without the Lord, we revel in fornication, impurity, idolatry, hatred, conflict, jealousy, selfishness, self-indulgence.

But to rejoice in the Lord requires a conversion of the whole person, repentance. We turn away from all those appetites, we turn away from the chaff of our souls, in order to accept Jesus as our Lord. We turn from all that to prayer. We turn our minds to God's truth, justice, purity, faithfulness, and love. We take joy in what is honorable and excellent. We stop trying to control all aspects of our lives. We trust God and simply do what he asks us to do.

That is repentance. And there is no peace without it. It will take everything you've got to turn around 180 degrees like that. It will take submitting to God burning the chaff away. But when we do it, we can rejoice that the Lord has and will satisfy all our needs. We don't have to be anxious about anything. We can live in peace, regardless of our circumstances. Not just the temporary absence of conflict, but the deeper peace which comes from being right with God.

Only with this true repentance, only with this complete turn-around and surrender to God, will we ever be able to bear good fruit. The comforting aspect of prophecy is that with this repentance there is no doubt that we will bear fruit. God will see to it that we are tended and pruned and watered and fed. And the tree that responds to his care will inevitably produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That is the fruit that "befits repentance".

But there is this choice. Do we wish to revel in our sins? Do we wish to be stalks of wheat that refuse to be harvested? Would we rather rot in the field? Or do we wish to be grain winnowed and gathered into the barn? Do we wish to be trees that produce good fruit?

“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is being cut down and thrown into the fire.” Allow Jesus to baptize you with fire so that you can bear fruit. Pray for a feeling of revulsion toward your sin, and for the strength to turn away from it. The other way leads to total destruction. Don’t go that way.