

What Then Should We Do?
Luke 3: 15-22
Don Lincoln

A colleague once told me this story: *"I often wonder how much graduating seniors remember of the speeches made on a college or university's commencement day. After all, a typical speech at such event can produce a torrent of rhetoric. I've been there. Probably so have you. In fact, one time I delivered the baccalaureate sermon, which came the morning of the commencement exercises.*

The sermon I produced and preached was substantial, heavy. It was about the truths and values and hopes of the Gospel, set in the context of a witty critique of the world and culture and institutions the nervous graduates were about to enter, blah-blah-blah. It went on for a while, you might say.

*Having completed that, after lunch came the **outdoor** commencement exercises. I was on the platform in a black robe on a very hot, sunny afternoon. The speaker was from the state department. He said about the same thing I said in the morning, except without Bible stories. Instead he told a lot of stories from his field experience working for the government. He too went on a while.*

And then came the faculty speech. This particular college had the custom of the senior class choosing a professor to address them as part of the commencement exercise. The class had chosen the Head of the English department and I – not alone I know – sighed when he was introduced as such. I tried to readjust my seat and dug in for what I assumed would be a third lap around the same track, this time with illustrations from Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, or heaven forbid, Chaucer perhaps. Some of us were praying for a miracle, like rain. And we received a miracle – but it wasn't a downpour.

*The professor stood up and said, "I have **THREE** things to say.....*

- 1. Learn more than you know now, because what you know now isn't really very much.*
 - 2. Don't forget your family.*
 - 3. Stay healthy; don't drink too much; and don't make yourself ill with stress.*
- Oh – and – PS: Send your children to Muskingum College.*

And he sat down."

The colleague who told me that story said to me,

“Don, the audience was stunned and so was I. I thought, ‘That’s it? Is that all you have to say?’ And then of course realized the graduating seniors had heard nothing that day more important than this:

- 1. Learn more*
- 2. Don’t forget your family*
- 3. Stay healthy.”*

I share that story, because it has similarities to this morning’s passage from Scripture. And if you were here on Sunday, December 9th, you’ll recognize a portion of the reading was used on that Sunday in Advent. I’m adding it to today’s lectionary text – because it’s one complete story – and I think it bears fruit to hear the whole context.

So listen to our text from Luke 3: 3-18; 21-22

This was, if you will, John’s commencement speech. Which truly captures the meaning of the word. Commencement is not nearly so much about graduating from, as it is about heading toward – about getting started. Ready, set, GO! It is about the launch. It is about having been given the facts; granted the understanding; primed with the knowledge – you set out on the path, the journey.

John comes out of the desert, preaches a condemnation of the way people are living and a radical call to repentance and conversion, symbolized by baptism. John calls his listeners snakes scurrying for hiding places before a spreading fire – not a terribly comforting, preaching metaphor. Neither is the ax at the root of the tree. And, as you heard, the people ask, “What then should we do?”

You might’ve expected John to say “Sign up and become a part of the new community I am organizing,” or “come along to our desert monastery and live a life of purity in the wilderness” or “lay down your life – and by the way – send in a check to keep this ministry going.”

It was, after all, a powerful and defining moment which John had created with the compelling passion of his preaching.

But how does John answer their question? “If you have enough food and clothing; share with those who do not. If you are a tax collector, don’t cheat. And if you are a soldier, don’t take advantage of anybody. And to all of you, don’t take what isn’t yours; be content with what you have.”

OK – maybe it’s a little more communal than “Learn more; Remember your family; and stay healthy.” But you get the point.

Sometimes our assumption is that religious conversion is or ought to be pretty dramatic. Our expectation is that tax collectors will repent, quit being tax collectors, and become preachers. Conversion ought to be dramatic – or at least interesting.

And John uses some pretty drastic images to describe what is coming – snakes; wheat and chaff. Crooked made straight; axe to the tree; thrown in the fire. And the winnowing fork.

But did you catch what the text says happens? “Now when all the people were baptized.....” Really? All of them? There weren’t a couple of them thinking about ax and fire and winnowing? After listening to that speech?

For me, the clue came in one, lovely little line in the text – verse 18 – which I never noticed before. “So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the Good News to the people.”

Somehow, at the heart of this fiery, Baptist’s message, the people – all of them, it sounds like – heard Good News.

I’ve always thought about this text – particularly the wheat and the chaff as pointed, very singular and decisive. “You – wheat! Over here! Hey – you – chaff!! Into the fire you go.” You know, sorting out the good people from the bad. 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 in the wrong pile!”¹ Terrifying.

As if there are good and bad.

But if winnowing is in fact an image of baptism, as suggested by John, then it becomes at once both comforting and disturbing. Comforting because nobody is being hurtled in the air or completely destroyed by fire. Disturbing because everyone – everyone – is going to be shaken up, cleansed, and remade by the fire of the Holy Spirit. Because the reality is all God has to work with is sinners.

And is there an image here perhaps tied to baptism that’s about separating the good from the bad within each of us? That the Messiah – Jesus Himself, about to be baptized, will take all the stuff of our lives and toss it in the air, allowing His spirit to blow away the parts that get in the way of who God wants us to be. And the good stuff kept – redeemed and used – while the chaff is burned away?

What if **THAT** will be how GOD does the winnowing? God, who by His power at work within us, clearing out the chaff in our life. In our daily endeavors. Daily. Constantly lifting up the stuff of our lives so that the chaff will get blown away by the power of God’s spirit.

So you and I do the simple things that John is describing that would show we know it’s not all about us. If we’ve got enough, share some with others

We get ourselves out of the way of what God longs to do in the world to redeem all creation. We are no longer so self-centered that we hog everything.

Suddenly I began to realize how this might sound like good news. For folks who knew there were 613 laws in the traditions of the rabbis; this really simple, straight-forward idea would have been good news. For those concerned about knowing the catechism backwards and forwards, this would have been good news.

Likewise, if you and I turn back to the straight-forward, simple message that both John and Jesus preach – baptism of repentance for sin – that we might love God; love neighbor. If you and I might be willing to be baptized onto that path and allow God to do God’s winnowing that needs to happen

every day in our lives. You and I know – like we sang in the opening hymn “Prone to wander Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love” – everyday that describes us.

God promises to take that winnowing fork and to separate the good stuff from the bad in our lives on a daily basis; to redeem even sinners like you and me, by the baptism and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So that in baptism we might die with Him and in baptism we might be raised with Him. So that you and I might be made more and more in Christ’s likeness. The One who exemplified for us what it looks like to love God, to love neighbor.

I have a colleague whose weekly email reminded folks that this week, this Sunday, he and the other pastors would be wandering through the congregation Sunday morning during worship, sprinkling water from the baptismal font on them and saying, “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” I’m guessing he put that in the email in part so that everyone who reads their email thoroughly will know that if you don’t want to get sprinkled, don’t show up on Sunday. Or don’t wear your ultra-suede jacket.

We’re not going to do that.....But, there’s water at each aisle. And some of you probably instinctively touched it when you walked in the room. Which is a good thing. It’s remembering your baptism marked with the sign of Christ. I’ll invite you as you depart to touch the water, remember your baptism and be thankful.

As I like to say, there are never too many times you can say yes to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. So – for those of you who have professed your faith in Christ publicly – I’m going to ask you to do so again. For those who haven’t – but are ready to – feel free; for those who aren’t sure about that – it’s fine not to respond.....

I’m going to ask three questions of faith – and they have simple answers. Like John’s words, straight-forward and simple. It’s even simpler to respond – “I do” is the church language for an affirmative response.

So Friends:

- Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world, do you? **I do.**
- Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in His grace and in His love, do you? **I do.**
- Do you intend to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, obeying His word and showing His love with God’s help, do you? **I do.**

May it be so, for our sake and for the sake of the world to which God sends us. Amen.

1. Joanna Harader, Christian Century, December 19, 2018, Living By the Word.