

“John said to the people that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers.’” Well. That’s nice talk. With this lovely pink candle called “joy” lit beside me, shouldn’t we be hearing something more like “A beautiful sight, we're happy tonight...”?

There’s no question that John the Baptizer is a hard-liner, but he was not a Grinch stealing Christmas joy. He was a prophet and a prophet in the ancient world was a person that God chose to speak, particularly about the relationship between God and the people. “Prophecy,” writes Rabbi Abraham Heschel, “Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of love, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words.<sup>1</sup>” Is it any wonder that John sounds a little grouchy?

John is refocusing the people’s attention to the restoration of right relationship with God. All of our readings—Zephaniah, Isaiah, Philippians and Luke—all point to the joyous reality of God's restorative kingdom. From the beginning of Genesis right down to this very moment, God will always restore. That is the good news that John proclaimed and that is where we find abiding joy.

John’s forceful *style* can make it hard for us to hear his message as joyful good news, but his *words* were actually quite close to what Jesus taught over the course of his earthly ministry. John was not entirely wrong about who Jesus was and what he came to do, but what John had no way of knowing was just *how* Luke’s Jesus would bring in the kingdom of heaven. A predominating expectation in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel was that the Messiah would be a great political leader descended from King David who would come with conquering power. John’s preaching seems to be what many expected, but over time John and many others had to change their thinking. Jesus, through a radical obedience to God, would turn the world that John knew upside down.

In this morning’s Gospel passage, John’s expectations get him a little out in front of Jesus. And if we want to bear fruits worthy of repentance, then we do well not to fall prey to similar distractions. All too often, when we hear warnings about wrath, fire and repentance, we slip into a kind of conditioned way of thinking that *God’s* wrath is at hand, that hell’s fire is the ensuing

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets: Two Volumes in One*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.

punishment and that being better behaved is the repentance that God wants from us.

But notice that when John mentions the “wrath to come,” he never claims that the wrath is God’s. You see, the author of Luke’s Gospel knows something that John doesn’t. Luke wrote his Gospel some 15 years or so after the Romans had crushed a Jewish rebellion and subsequently destroyed the second temple along with a significant part of Jerusalem. At that time, there was more than a little conjecture that God allowed the Romans to vanquish the Jews because they were in disagreement with each other. This was history for Luke and he may have given John’s story a way to account for the relentless violence of these events.

John’s reference to the people as viper spawn is, indeed, a strong insult. He may well be referring to the lack of solidarity that has been growing from generation to generation. This inherited divisiveness has perhaps led to so much separation from God and from other Jews that the crowd has become more like the children of vipers than the children of Abraham. And yet God’s promise of restoration to right relationship is based on who we are as *God’s* children.

And so when John warns that the axe is at the root of the trees, we do not need to hear him saying that an angry God is waiting to cut us down as unredeemable sinners. First, John does not put the axe in God’s hands. And second, farmers routinely cut away dead wood or soured trees and burn them, not as punishment, but because it protects the fruiting trees.

When John talks about the winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire, we do not need to hear that God is planning to separate sinners from saints and burn those who misbehave or don’t experience God the same way that we do. Again, a farmer with a winnowing fork is not a fearful image. They separate and burn chaff as a routine chore without yelling, “Take that!” It is simply part of the process.

The crowd is not fearful or challenging because they likely recognize these references to natural processes. Instead, they are curious, asking: “What shall we do to bear fruit worthy of repentance?”

Even when John talks about repentance, we do not need to hear that God presenting us with a threatening “turn-or-burn” ultimatum. There is, instead, a joyful alternative.

In 2003, the actor Martin Sheen appeared on a show called *Inside the Actor’s Studio*. The host, James Lipton, and acting students ask actors about their lives and their craft. At the end of the interview, Lipton asked Martin

Sheen this question: “If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say to you once you reach the Pearly Gates?” Sheen looked away from Lipton, shook his head with a little chuckle and said, “Well, I don’t believe we go to heaven, I believe we *become* heaven.”

I think John the Baptizer would appreciate Sheen’s version of repentance. To bear fruits worthy of repentance, we each must remake our lives as preparation for God to make us into heaven. God guides some of us to remake our lives as monastics, moving into the cloister to meditate, chant and pray day and night. God draws others of us to remake our lives as activists who pursue social justice and economic reform. Changes like these certainly have merit. But these are not everyone’s path.

For most of us, for *most* of us, the question remains: “What shall I do to bear fruit worthy of repentance?” or perhaps, “How, God, how can I become heaven?” There are two main avenues to remaking our lives. Both will enhance our awareness of God and reconnect us to God’s yearning for us. Both result in what is called *metanoia*—a change of one’s mind that leads to more compassionate and justice-loving action toward others. One path involves reforming our lives in response to some event or insight that brings about a conversion of our hearts and minds, which then leads to new actions.

The other path comes at it from the other end. That is to say, we can engage in behaviors that, over time, can lead us to a change in our hearts and minds. Acting, for example, as if we cared for our neighbor produces feelings for and commitment to our neighbor. This is the path of penitence that John the Baptizer seems to have in mind as he talks to the crowd. “What shall I do to bear fruit worthy of repentance?” they ask. And John gives them simple, specific actions that are readily available to them, trusting that if they take these actions, God will make a little more heaven show up on earth.

John didn’t insist that these people take on entirely new spiritual practices or ambitious projects that they’d never imagined. No, he sent each person who came to him back to the circumstances where God had found them and said, in essence, “Do what you’ve been doing but with greater love.” To some, he suggested that they share what they have with people outside their immediate families. Others John urged to be honest in their work so that others did not suffer exploitation. And still others he admonished not abuse the power invested in them. Notice that when people asked John what the coming changes meant for them in their lives, John sent them back to their lives already changed. He did not compel anyone to forsake the circumstances of their lives in order to save the world.

What John advised every one of them was to be faithful to whatever task was theirs to perform in life. To go back to the circumstances and relationships they were already in and to trust that what they could act within God's good Creation in ways that—small as though they may seem to be—will be part of God's work of cosmic renewal.

I saw some of you bringing a little heaven to earth this last week after the sump pump in our basement failed. As the water rose, so did a crew who gathered remarkably fast and others joined in. Together, they acted to stop the water and immediately began the process of cleaning up. Bishop Rickel called these folks "remarkable in the way they responded" and in one way, he is absolutely right. In another way, everyone who participated in any way all through Tuesday night (and I do mean all through the night!) and on into the next few days are as unremarkable as you and me.

Today is the Sunday we light the pink candle on the Advent Wreath. We also call this day Gaudete Sunday after the first line of an ancient hymn traditionally sung on the Third Sunday in Advent. In Latin, the hymn begins *Gaudete, gaudete!* meaning "Rejoice, rejoice!", like the hymn that we will sing at the end of the Mass. Today, even with the scent of wet basement still hanging in the air, we give ourselves a little more room for rejoicing in the nearness of God's presence.

God's presence draws nearer in the simple acts of love that we do for each other—doing what we do with greater love. Whether that's mopping floors at 3:00 in the morning, making sure the coffee is made on Sunday or straightening up the kitchen cupboards, God draws nearer through seemingly unremarkable actions.

And we rejoice.

In the acts of doing what we do for others with greater love, God makes us a little more heavenly, cutting away stains of selfishness, burning the chaff of any unkindness that separates us from each other and cleansing anything that "sorely hinders" our reception of Christ and God's kingdom into our midst.

And we rejoice.

The good news that John proclaims is that light is coming in Christ Jesus, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, the one who shows us what becoming heaven on earth is all about.

And, quite rightly, we rejoice!