



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 December 15, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "To be a snake or to have a snake"

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and 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; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be 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 strap 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.

"To Be a Snake or to Have a Snake"

Let's start off today with the proposition that God does not throw people away, that Christ does not throw people into the fire, and that you are not a lone tree with an ax laid at your roots.

'But wait,' you say, 'isn't that the opposite of what John the Baptist just told us?'

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. 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.'

One who is more powerful than I is coming...His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Many of you know I grew up in Southern Baptist Churches, and though the churches of my youth were relatively moderate (not the 'turn or burn' variety of Baptist) every summer I would attend a Baptist Camp on Caswell Beach in North Carolina,¹ where the speakers were increasingly Evangelical in tone, some would call them fundamentalist.

I remember a preacher who spent an hour (an hour!) describing the agony of Jesus's crucifixion, all the while, telling the teenagers in the room, Jesus did this because of us (not even 'for us' but 'because of us'). I was maybe 14 when I heard that sermon. I remember thinking about how my sins did that to Jesus. Already, I felt like chaff ready to be thrown into the fire.

Or as John says, *A brood of vipers!*

Another year, the speaker was this athletic, big guy, easily 250 pounds of muscle. He talked about the radical leap of faith that real Christians must make. Jump out of the old life. Jump into the new. And he would illustrate this by making these huge, and heavy jumps across the floor, over and over again. (Forgive me if I won't demonstrate it for you).

What I heard was: I need to change. What I am, is no good. I'd been going to church for years. I was Baptist camp, for goodness sake, but still, I must be on the wrong side. I had to be. Otherwise, why preach this sermon to me?

¹ <https://fortcaswell.com>

Today, I wish I could ask that preacher:

How do you know when you've made that jump? His jump across the stage was so simple; you're either on one side of the line or the other.

But, frankly, most of the time, I'm not so sure. Some days I'm on one side. Some days the other.

Some days I'm wheat. Some days I'm chaff. How do you know what side you're on?

My guess is that preacher would respond, 'that's exactly something that chaff would say.' *You brood of vipers.*

Today, I realize what those Baptist camp preachers were offering was a dualistic point of view. Psychologists might call it 'all or nothing' thinking, where: you've got to choose a side: children of snakes or children of faith; wheat or chaff; sheep or goats. And those on the wrong side of God are thrown away, *the ax is at the root of the trees.*

I can tell you from experience that living in that dualistic religious frame produces no little amount of shame. You find yourself questioning: 'Do I really believe? Did I really repent? My life, my faith, doesn't seem to measure up to what those preachers are talking about. Am I just an unfruitful tree, after all?'

I wonder: what is your experience, with 'all or nothing' religious thinking?

So, let's back up, and return to our starting proposition: God does not throw people away.

How can we square that with what John says, in Luke chapter 3?

To do this, we turn to the wider scope of the Gospel.

Last week, I mentioned three stories unique to the Gospel of Luke that counter the mindset of the Empire within which the Gospel was written. These three stories are:

The Good Samaritan
The Prodigal Son
And the story of Zacchaeus

These same stories are instructive this week as well:

Recall, for example, that when the father welcomes the prodigal son home after years of wasteful living, the father runs out with open arms, at the sight of son coming up the road. The father has no idea what the son is coming to tell him, no idea of what became of him after leaving home for a life of pleasure, no inkling of what he believes, now. All the father wanted was to lay eyes on him, so he threw a party.

Likewise, the Good Samaritan, who helps the man beaten by robbers on the side of the road. You'll remember the Samaritan, not the priest, was the good neighbor, but Jesus doesn't say a word about the Samaritan's faith. And in fact, being a Samaritan means that he didn't believe the same things that Jesus believed. That's what makes a Samaritan a Samaritan. The point of the story is that what you believe has nothing to do with being 'a good neighbor.'

And finally there's Zacchaeus. When Jesus looks up and sees the tiny tax collector in the tree, he invites himself over to Zacchaeus's house. Jesus doesn't know a thing about Zacchaeus's intentions when he does that. He just sees a man everyone else hates, up in a tree, and Jesus says, 'Hey, this guy too is a child of God.'

What side of the line of faithfulness were the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, and Zacchaeus on, after all? Were they wheat or chaff? Maybe, maybe, they were a little bit of both. Maybe you and I, are a little bit of both.

And God does not throw them, or us, away. Instead, over and over again, Jesus rebukes the crowd when *they* try to throw people away, when they speak out of a dualistic frame:

"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ask the Pharisees.

So, what then of John the Baptist's warning, the wheat and the chaff, the ax lying at the root of the tree?

This week, our men's book group discussed Robin Wall Kimmerer's poignant book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Dr. Kimmerer is a member of the indigenous Potawatomi Nation while also holding a doctorate in botany, the study of plants, from the University of Wisconsin.

In one chapter she discusses Potawatomi basket makers who have been using the wood of Black Ash trees to fashion their baskets for generations.² Black Ash is not an especially abundant tree in North America but its wood has a unique combination of flexibility and hardness that make it ideal for weaving a basket together.

Lately, though, indigenous basket makers in New York near where Dr. Kimmerer now works noticed a decline in Black Ash in the forests, a result they thought, of overharvesting. So, Kimmerer and her team of graduate students did a survey of the trees in New York forests, counting the trees and determining their ages. They found, it turns out, an abundance of very young Ash Trees and very old Ash Trees. What was missing, however, were teenage Ash Trees. The young samplings were not able to take root and grow in the forest canopy, with only one exception.

They found plenty of adolescent Black Ash trees in the places where the basket makers were harvesting them. Dr. Kimmerer and her team hypothesized that the decline in Black Ash in the area was therefore not due to overharvesting but to underharvesting. Cutting trees in a thick forest canopy creates gaps where light can reach young trees, giving them space to grow, whereas in thick, overgrown areas, they are choked out by their older and higher siblings.

Sometimes you need to cut down some trees in order to make space for new life.

You see, a tree is never just a tree. A tree is a part of a forest, a wider ecosystem. Their roots connect across vast, fungal systems, creating a vast underground network invisible to the eyes. A tree never stands alone. And even when one tree falls, it is not discarded. When it is allowed to stay in place, it nourishes new life. Have you ever seen a line of trees springing up from a fallen trunk? It's called a nurse line.

Perhaps then, thinking of ourselves as lone trees, threatened by the ax, is not the proper metaphor. That's not how trees work.

A better reading of the Baptist's message, is to conceive of oneself not as a tree, but as a forest. Each of us a complex mixture of parts, these parts in need of care, attention, and yes, sometimes, when a part of us is no longer bearing fruit, then

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2020), ch. 14.

pruning is in order to create opportunities for new life and growth. John's message, is less a threat; it's an invitation.

Through John, God isn't threatening us with fire. God is inviting us, instead, to grow.

Notice for example, what John says to the crowds, when they implore him, "What should we do?"

John responds, *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise...Tax collectors came to be baptized...[And John] said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'* *[Likewise] soldiers...[and] he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.*

In other words, God doesn't throw people away. And neither should we.

John invites us out of those systems, those patterns, those thoughts that treat people, including even ourselves, like we are disposable.

And that invitation includes our faith. Especially our faith.

When it is your faith, or even just that voice in the back of your head, that you sometimes mistake for God, that tells you, 'you don't belong, you're not worthy, you're not enough, you don't believe the right way, and your life does not measure up'...John invites us, to take an ax to that tree.

We need more room, in our heart and in our head and in our soul, for more breathing space. And a bit more sunlight.

So, in this season of preparation, by all means, let us pray for God to come, and chop down our trees, wash away our sins, and burn up the chaff.

Because what God burns away is that which contradicts this fundamental truth:

- This truth is:
 - that you,
 - and your neighbor,
 - and the indigent on the street,
 - and immigrant at the border,
 - and the refugee from the war,

- and yes, even the person who makes you want to roll your eyes every time they open their mouths,
 - you are all God's beloved children.

Already, the ax is lying at the root of the tree.
And that is good news.

Amen.