

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Epiphany 1-C; 13 January 2019  
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

**With the Holy Spirit and with Fire**

*In nomine...*

**I. Intro**

I enjoy hiking. I'm not a big-time, impressive hiker. I've probably spent a total of about three hours on the Appalachian Trail. But I like walking in the woods. When we lived in the Bronx, Becky and I would take Aviva, or I would go with my friend Hugo, and we would ride the Metro North up the Harlem River to some little town or another. We'd walk through town to a trailhead and spend the day hiking around a small mountain or maybe down a section of the Croton Aqueduct.

Now often, too often, hiking means gear. Sometimes carrying just the right thing can really make the difference between a joyful hike and a miserable one, or even between a safe hike and a dangerous one. But the question is, which gear? And how much gear? Because too many handy things will leave you with a heavy pack and start turning your miles into misery.

So for me, every good hike has to begin not only with gathering the things I need to bring, but then also with the pulling out of things that really I should leave behind. I need a sharper definition of what's "essential" and a more discriminating eye when packing. That's why a smaller backpack is better than a bigger backpack. Because with a smaller, lighter pack, I will cover more miles with more joy, than I would when weighed down by just one or two more super-handy gadgets that I want to bring because, well, there's room in my pack. And, you know, "just in case."

How does this relate to today's Gospel? Give me a minute.

## II. Thesis

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. He was a little scary, wearing rough clothes and living out in the desert. He was not polite company.

John was a hellfire and brimstone preacher. He would threaten people, urging them to a baptism of repentance. When certain Pharisees came to be baptized just because it seemed like a nice thing to do, and not out of personal conviction, he responded in a less-than-polite fashion by calling them a "brood of vipers." Maybe it was the pastoral thing to do.

John also spoke prophetically of the coming Messiah. John prepared the way for Jesus and spoke of one who would come and deal with the people even more harshly than he did! John said,

*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.*

The Christ is coming, says John, with the Holy Spirit and fire. With an iron tool he will separate wheat and chaff, and the chaff will be burnt in a fire that never ends. John was expecting something fierce!

Now if you hear this passage from the point-of-view of 20<sup>th</sup> century American Fundamentalism or Evangelicalism, you're apt to think John is predicting Jesus' work of judgement, bring some to heaven and consigning others to hell. This is a popular, "get what you deserve" kind of theology that has dominated American religion for the last century and more. But is this the only, or even the best, way to understand this particular passage of Scripture?

## III. Good News

Let's take a little closer look at John's illustration. John's talking about Jesus as if Jesus was a processor of grain. Grain goes through a whole process between the field and the table. It's not like an apple that you just pluck off the tree and start eating. Harvesting grain is a laborious process.

No one really plucks each grain of wheat from a head on a stalk. Instead, one threshes the grain by beating it or rubbing it or otherwise processing it. Do you remember what the disciples did when they ate grain on the sabbath? They plucked some ears, and then they rubbed it between their hands. That's the threshing part. It separates the wheat grains from the chaff: from the stalk and the less-nourishing pieces of the plant that hold the grain.

In Jesus' day, threshing would be done by having livestock or wheels roll over and over the grain, breaking apart the grains of wheat from the parts that held them. The parts that had given them life but were no longer necessary. Then one would take a pitchfork and toss the whole mess up in the air. The heavier, smaller grains of wheat would fall to the ground. The chaff, lighter and with more surface area, would catch a cross breeze and blow away. If you collected a bunch of it, I'm sure it was crazy flammable: unquenchable isn't just another word for hell: it's also way of simply saying, "Good luck putting *that* fire out!" When it burns, it burns and it's gone. Once it's lit, there's no going back. Sort of like the garland if it had been left hanging in the church one more week.

#### **IV. Invitation**

So the illustration here is not necessarily one of dividing up people into those who are good and those who are bad. Our Bible tells us that all have sinned and fallen short. Jesus tells us that no one is good except God alone. So what else might be going on here?

John tells the people that Jesus will baptize them "with the Holy Spirit and fire." We associate the gift of the Holy Spirit with baptism. In baptism we offer up our lives to God: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Life can often feel like a threshing: like we're being beaten on every side. Things happen. Illnesses come around. Children struggle. Relationships are strained. Money is tight. Mistakes are made. And we find ourselves buffeted and beaten, like grain that is being threshed. I don't believe that God intends or wants these hurtful things to happen in our lives. But happen they do. And in baptism we offer the whole mess to God, saying, "Here! Maybe you can do something with this!"

And indeed, God can.

As evil in our life surfaces, evil from without and evil from within, Jesus is standing there with a winnowing fork, tossing up our lives, freshening the dark corners, and allowing all of those harmful, hurtful, self-defeating habits and convictions to be blown away by God's Holy Spirit. "Spirit" means breath or wind. As we learn to understand ourselves as separate from those things that hurt us, as we learn to let go of them, it is God's Holy Spirit that blows them away from us, out of our hair. It is in the face of evil that we will most clearly experience the healing, saving hand of God at work on our lives. God promises to burn up, in unquenchable fire, those things that wound us if we can just let them go of them, and free them to blow away on God's Holy Wind. I don't know about you, but I have some stuff that I can't wait to see burned up and out of my life.

## **V. Conclusion**

There is a fire burning into which God longs to throw every bit of hurtful baggage you are carrying, freeing you up to be your most genuine self, the person God created you to be. John the Baptist proclaimed that would be the work of Jesus. When you encounter threshing and beatings in your life, do not despair. Hang on. God is still there. And because God is there, you are on the road to freedom.

When headed out hiking, most people carry too much stuff. We feel like if we have it, we ought to use it. We feel insecure without it. But often the stuff just weighs us down, without adding to the joy of the day.

So take those things that weigh you down and offer them up to God in prayer. Ask God, "What about this?" and listen for a response. Talk to a friend or someone you trust. Make an appointment with me to offer a confession. It takes time to learn to hear God's voice, but maybe that's the point of these lives we're living.

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