

Prepare Him a Place
17 December 2000
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Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18

It doesn't sound like much of a Christmas story. As Dr. Battles mentioned last week, it almost seems like a mistake to have these readings about John the Baptist so close to Christmas.

Instead of Christmas cheer, goodwill to all, here we have John calling out about the brood of vipers, warning that every tree that is not productive will be thrown into the fire.

Fire isn't a symbol we normally associate with Christmas, unless it's the gentle flicker of the advent wreath or the small candles we will hold during the Christmas eve. Yet here we have fire mentioned 3 times in a short passage – each tree that does not bear fruit, separation of the wheat and the chaff, and Jesus – coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

We think of fire as a force for destruction, a dangerous force and two of the references in this passage reflect that danger. But then there is that strange phrase referring to Jesus – “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” This idea, this “baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire” has been the source of a lot of confusion and controversy. The imagery of baptism and its association with water and fire seem to be mutually exclusive. When we think of fire we think of danger and destruction, of fire and brimstone.

But there is another image of fire, one that we do not see here, but one which might be more helpful. It is the ability of fire not to destroy, but to purify.

How can we think of it this way? The Gospel reading does give us some freedom to think about it this way. Instead of focusing on the beginning and end of John's words, let's look at the question posed to him by those who heard him. It is the same question that we might have asked if we were in John's audience:

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

It was the question on everyone's mind, but no one dared to ask it. Were his words of warning certain condemnation, or was there some way for them to get back onto the right path?

Perhaps surprisingly, the commands John gives seem so simple they almost seem insignificant. He does not ask people to adopt his desert lifestyle, to renounce the world and all its trappings. Instead he tells them to share what they have, beginning with the basics – food and clothing. Share what you have with those who do not have enough. To those in positions of power, he tells them not to abuse the power that they have been given.

With the powerful language he has used, it seems almost too simple of a task. Is that enough? Is it enough to make these small gestures? John's answer is "yes."

He doesn't explain himself further, but I think we can understand his reasoning. Remember the words we heard last week, the prophecy which John fulfilled:

This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

How do we prepare a way for the Lord? Is there any procession or parade which could be grand enough to celebrate the coming of Jesus? Are there any gifts which could be given, any feasts or festivals magnificent enough for God's glory?

We would probably say "no" but that is not John's answer. John gives us the command and the prescription – no festivals, none of that. It is not a party that needs preparing, but our hearts. It is in and through these acts, these seemingly *too-small* acts, that we begin to prepare a place in our hearts and in our lives for Jesus.

Remember these words of Jesus which will come later in Luke's gospel: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" – the same is true for our obedience. If we can follow God's command in the small things, if we can make a small opening in our hearts for him through these tiny acts of obedience, then we will have prepared a place for Jesus in all the areas of our lives.

And when Jesus comes in, he will be like that fire. That Holy Spirit that dwells within us will begin to purify us from within, not to destroy us but to perfect us. The dark places within us will begin to lose ground, and we will have more and more room in our hearts and lives for the will of God, we will be transformed.

As we enter these last days of waiting, we can examine our lives and find the wheat – those places which are good and noble, those places we have already given over – and we can separate them from the chaff within our hearts – those places which are stubborn, those places which are not given over.

Purifying gold and threshing of wheat – the symbols we use for the transformation that can occur tell us that the process will be difficult, but it is the road we have been called to follow. Jesus awaits us, promising to go before us and beside us for the entire journey.

We have prepared Christmas trees and packages, travel plans and dinner party menus. We are prepared for the events of the season. Now is the time to make sure that we are ready for the birth of the baby in the manger. A small child in a far-off land, who would have thought of what a difference he would make...

Find that place you can prepare for him this season, even if it is a small place in one corner of your life – you may find that it too will make much more of a change than you ever imagined