

“A CONDEMNATION OF TRADITIONAL CHURCH, OR...”

Matthew 3.1–12 (TNIV)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

*“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”*

John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

What a text...

A text that, had I the option, I probably would have skipped over in the lectionary. I don’t really know what to do with texts about fire (unquenchable fire, no less), broods of vipers, axes and a winnowing fork (which, let’s be honest here, at least for me this conjures up images of a little red man with pointy ears, a giant pitch fork and, pun intended, a ‘devilish’ grin). Where is the good news in this? Where is good news found in judgment? Let me share with you a few thoughts and maybe, together, we can make some sense out of this story.

Travel with me to the banks of the Jordan River. On these banks, handfuls, hundreds, maybe even thousands gather to hear the ranting of a madman; a madman covered with camel’s hair, loosely held together with a leather belt. The people have come because they know something is up. Something new. There is a spirit in the air – in fact, perhaps it is The Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord descending upon something new, something that is growing from the bottom

up, something that is bringing renewal and hope to a people greatly dissatisfied with the current religious trends and hierarchy of the established Jewish religion.

Now, travel with me to the local synagogues, to the temple courts, where we see groups of older men, with flowing robes and beards, huddled, hunkered down as if they were the offensive line of a football team trying to figure out their game plan. And...they are. They've heard about this "John the Baptist" – some of them have even heard murmurings about a young man named Jesus. And there's been some talk about the Messiah; it's clear they need to "check this thing out." In reality, they're scared.

They finally arrive at the banks of the Jordan and, while they had hoped to quietly observe, perhaps to stand in the back, John calls them out, and he doesn't use the most friendly greeting: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath! Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' The ax is already at the root of the trees..."

John calls them out. Can already see their "holier-than-thou" attitude of "We know how to be religious – we know the things of God, we know the law of God." He announces judgment on these groups that were holding tightly onto the status quo, the prescribed ways of doing things. "But we have Abraham – you might be trying something new here, but....but we have Abraham – we have tradition – our connection with Abraham trumps anything you're doing..."

But John says 'no.' John's message is directed at the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the traditional religious structures of that day: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is coming – repent, for something new is in the air, a new Spirit, a new way of being, a new vision for life in the world." Repentance was required from those who remained closed to anything that was 'different' or 'new.' Something, someone perhaps, was coming – and John knew he needed to help prepare the way.

Isn't this where we are today? The institutional mainline church is the status quo that John would condemn and judge today – and there is something new happening – the Spirit is in the air – and we need to be ready for the church emerging, the organic holistic missional communities, the church plants...

We need to see that these new expressions are the future of the church. There are many who would simply like to toss Emergent into just a Christian sub-cultural fad, a small movement of black-clothed, goatee-sporting, pierced, tattooed, 20-somethings...but we can't do that. We can't remain stubborn and rooted in our traditions, which may or may not breathe new life, or we're no better off than the Pharisees, and we become the brood of vipers. We need to move aside and be open to the new wave of the Spirit and heed John's call to repentance for the mainline church today.

[PAUSE]

This would be a really great sermon to preach. I mean, it works for me. It makes me the person who's 'in' and keeps everyone else 'out.' It's pretty clear, no ambiguity here. It's black & white, either/or – you know, one of 'those' sermons where the preacher ends up being right, and a lot of other people end up being wrong.

But preaching that sermon misses the point, preaching that sermon creates division and disharmony. I can't preach that.

Return back with me to the banks of the Jordan River. The people are sitting, waiting to see what is going to happen. John is baptizing, ushering in a new community of faith. And the Pharisees and Sadducees are making their way down the rocky path toward the river's edge.

And there it is – you can feel it in the air. The presence of God? No. The Spirit we've all been waiting for? No. No, this is different. This has a mild stench to it – it's the judgment that is present in the hearts of all those by the river. It's the arrogance and pretense found in the Pharisees and Sadducees; knowing that they are right, no matter what. It's the subtle but present distrust and objection toward the establishment found in those present for baptism, knowing that they are right, and on the correct side of a new movement of God. And it's the loud and obnoxious contempt toward the religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees found in John the Baptist himself.

Judgment. Judgment everywhere.

This situation doesn't seem too far off from what we are facing today. There are more than enough John the Baptists who condemn and judge today's institutional religions, and equally as many Pharisees and Sadducees who display a form of snobbery toward any expression of faith that doesn't involve committees, hierarchical leadership structures and good pension plans.

Judgment. Judgment everywhere.

But, the text is clear: judgment doesn't belong to us. John proclaims: *"But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

Judgment belongs to the Son of the Divine Lover, Jesus. Jesus, who is more good and loving than we can imagine, he is the one who will carry the winnowing fork – judgment is not ours to grasp, but to let go, and hand to the one whose grace is never-ending.

Where does this leave us? If the judgment is not ours, if the judgment belongs to Christ, what is left for us to do?

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

It's not our job to be asking the questions about who is right, Emergent or the mainline, conservatives or the liberals...it's not about who is postmodern or modern or even, as some of my friends like to joke about, pre-modern. It's about living lives that seek to follow Christ; it's about bearing fruit in response to the presence of God's kingdom in the here and the now; it's about leaving the judgment to Jesus.

We are called to be people of God, followers of Christ, whose lives will produce good fruit. And it will not all look alike: fruit varies in type, color, texture and taste. But our call is to focus on the cultivation of good fruit, of creating communities that seek to live out the love and grace of Christ - not condemnation and judgment.