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Good news of Great Joy?
 Luke 3:7-18

There is an aboriginal tribe in Australia called the Martu people. Like most indigenous peoples, they have adapted to modern life with all of its conveniences, but every so often they leave civilization behind and go into the outback to hunt in the wilderness. The Martu have what seems to me to be an unusual way of hunting: they set fire to a field and stand ready with clubs to whack whatever runs out of it, fleeing the flames. One particular delicacy they like to hunt are goanas: massive carnivorous lizards that look like a mix between a giant iguana and a gila monster.¹

Why am I telling you this, you ask?

Because John calls his people the “brood of vipers” for coming to hear him preach, asking, “who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” The wrath he describes as the Messiah’s wind fueling an unquenchable fire of justice. I couldn’t help but see the Martu women standing with clubs at the ready at the edge of a flaming field, waiting for the goanas to slither out.

Now. John’s mother Elizabeth must not have been like my mom. My mother always told me I’d catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. An English teacher, she loves a good aphorism. This one, of course, means people are more likely to do what we want if we are kind to them.

Elizabeth clearly never told her son this, or if she did, he didn’t listen. But maybe he didn’t need to. Because the people don’t seem to be repelled by his brash words. I guess if you trek out to the wilderness to hear a guy in a hairshirt preach, you’re willing to endure any number of challenges to find salvation. What’s interesting to me is that the gospel writer Luke calls John’s proclamation good news.

The ax is lying at the root of the trees...every tree that doesn’t bear the fruit of repentance will be chopped down and thrown into the fire? The promised one is coming with a winnowing fork to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire?

That’s good news? How can that be good news?

Why are we hearing it now, on the third Sunday in Advent? There are only nine days till Christmas! I’m ready to hear the angel Gabriel say to Mary, *Greetings favored one*, ready, even, for Mary to be great with child and craving figs with honey and complaining

¹ The Martu are featured in the first episode, “Fire,” of Michael Pollen’s documentary *Cooked* on Netflix, based on his book of the same name.

about having to walk to Bethlehem on swollen ankles, ready at least for the Magnificat and its hopeful promise of transformation of the whole earth! Almost ready for the baby in the manger and the star in the sky and the angels singing Glory to God in the highest heaven.

But no. Today, we hear John.

John is the one who leapt in his mother's womb when Mary drew near... John is the one who comes before. John is the prophet who prepares us. And part of what makes his news good, is that no matter what, it is for us. It doesn't matter if we get lost in the wilderness and show up late, his message is for us. It doesn't matter if we are here like wild goanas, fleeing from the wrath to come, his message is for us. It doesn't matter if we are a soldier who has plundered the poor, or if we are a tax collector who has profited from the suffering of others, his message is still for us. In fact, Luke's message seems to be that no matter who we are, no matter where we come from, whatever it is we believe or doubt, no matter what we've done, no matter who we love or how we vote, John's message is for us: Repent! Prepare the way! The promised one is coming for *all* of us and that is very good news, indeed!

I realized as I studied the text this week that I've misunderstood the image of the wheat and the chaff. I've found it to be problematic because I've imagined it to be a separation of people – good over here, bad over there; some saved, some burned with unquenchable fire. But that isn't what John is saying at all. Each wheat grain has a dry chaff covering it that is inedible. The chaff must be separated from the wheat so that the grain can be eaten, or ground into flour. *Every* grain has a covering, a chaff. By separating the chaff from the grain, the grain is purified, made useful – and each grain is saved. So this metaphor is about refinement, purification, and salvation for all people. Separating the grain from the chaff is about each one of us repenting of what we have done wrong, so that each of us ready to be used for God's work in the world. As one writer put it, "There is a line between good and evil, and it doesn't run between groups; it runs through the heart of each person."²

It can be tempting in our divided world to point fingers, to say "those are the bad guys, but we are the good guys." It's easier to see things that way. But really, each one of us with power is complicit in upholding systems that exploit and oppress others. Each one of us with power has been a tax collector and a soldier. Each one of us has chaff that needs to be burned away. But the good news is that Christ came, even for us. John is crying out in the wilderness – can we hear him?

And if we hear him, will we listen? What, then, shall we do? We join the crowds in wondering, How do we begin to repent and prepare the way?

² [Alexandr Solzhenitsyn](http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-advent-three), quoted in "Joy, Wind, and Fire: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Advent Week Three." 12/12/18, <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-advent-three>.

Good news: John's instructions are simple:

No matter who you are, no matter where you find yourself:

Be kind and compassionate.

Be honest.

Be content with what you have and share it.

If you have two coats, give one to someone else who needs it. It's just that simple. As one who has a fleece jacket, and a down coat, and an anorak for rainy days and a couple of other coats besides, though, I can tell you – sharing what we have is just that easy, and it's just that difficult.

John's call for kindness, sharing, and honesty seems fairly benign, but Herod arrested him and put him in prison for preaching these things, and for pointing out Herod's need for repentance. Proclaiming the good news can be dangerous. For some people in power, God's good news of justice and restoration, kindness and compassion doesn't sound very good. Because it means changing how we operate. And it wasn't just in John's time that proclaiming the good news was dangerous. Just this week, 32 faith leaders were arrested at the US-Mexico border in San Diego, calling for a change to US border policy that has put thousands of children into indefinite detention and condemned many thousands of others to languish in squalor in Mexico as they await a chance to claim asylum in the US. Here in Birmingham, at least four activists calling for transparency and accountability in the death of E.J. Bradford have been arrested for their role in the protests.

What chaff in our own hearts needs to be burned away so that we can hear the cry of our neighbors and respond with compassion instead of vitriol, scorn, or violence?

The repentance to which John calls us is one that looks forward, toward a future where we live differently³ – where we courageously tell the truth, share what we have with others, and act out of love always. Today, we look forward to the future of our church, where with our new pastor's leadership we will continue to Speak Up, Reach Out, and Build Bridges so that the good within each of our hearts increases, and the good news of God's redeeming love is proclaimed with all that we do.

Each one of us can help prepare the way for God's coming kingdom, which came in Bethlehem in the birth and life of Jesus and is coming in Birmingham, in Fairfield, in Hueytown, in Homewood, in Vestavia, and even by God in Hoover. God's kingdom is coming and each one of us, no matter who we are, no matter where we come from, can prepare with the choices we make – with the love that we share, the truth we tell, the kindness we offer. Whatever our jobs.

Wherever we find ourselves.

John's message is for us. Jesus is coming. Get ready.

³ *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1, Chapters 1-11*. Cynthia Jarvis and Beth Johnson, editors.