

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:7-18

The Rev. Steve White, mostly, with a little of The Rev. Brooks Cato

Just about every week, my buddy Fr. Steve and I send each other our sermons. Most of the time we sort of pat each other on the back for a job well done, maybe point out something that could add to the overall message, and once in a while, correct a line that could come off differently from what we intended. But once in a blue moon, Fr. Steve writes something too good to keep it locked up in his three churches. And today's sermon is one of those. This is a Fr. Steve sermon, and it says more of what I wanted to say than I could get on the page myself. So, here goes.

Picture it: Steve couldn't have been more than six years old. His mom and dad and he had gone camping with some friends. They'd just arrived at the campsite where they'd be spending the next week, and the men were pitching the tent and his mom and her girlfriend had started the fire going. It had been a long drive for Steve and his buddies and they were eager to get out of the car and go explore down at the lake. After a few hours, things settled in and the women and other kids went down to the little store on-site to get some supplies. Steve stayed behind. The fire had died down by then, and the coals were white, no longer smoking. He kept inching closer to them, curious about them. Steve's dad saw him and warned him to stay away. The coals may not be firing up, but they could still be hot. Also Steve was barefoot, having shed his flipflops hours before. His dad went back to his fishing and beer with his friend. Steve, predictably, immediately forgot what his dad had said. And he walked right through those white-hot coals. As soon as he did Steve could hear the echo of his dad's warning in his ear. And Steve was ashamed. And he was afraid, because his dad was not a particularly gentle and loving man. So somehow he stifled the cry which rose up in his throat. Steve never said a word, in spite of the pain. Now I suppose, in hindsight, the burn could not have been that bad or Steve would not have been able to get through the week without someone noticing him limp. But still, it was something he felt he had to hide away.

And all that makes me think of that story with John's words about Jesus burning the chaff away. John has made his way to the wilderness – the wildness. And his message is so unusual and so compelling that people are streaming out to the river to meet him and to get baptized. Because his message is one of repentance, of turning around. Something that seems so hard to do. And John agrees with that. It is hard. What John offers is no easy task, it is no cheap grace. It comes with a cost. But...and here's the thing...John insists that it is doable, that one is coming who will fill the world with a spirit so powerful that we can change, truly change. Truly repent. Truly be set free.

And then John throws in a twist. The chaff will be separated from the grain and will be burned. And after centuries of hearing Gospel imagery, I think we have often let ourselves confuse this separation of wheat and chaff as separating one group from another. Something useful from something useless. The people who get it right from the people who get it wrong. The sheep from the goats, the Jews from the Samaritans, what is Caesar's from what is God's. And so often we hear John's words as ones of threat — and I suppose they are or at least they can be. But this time through, I hear them differently. This time I think John is NOT trying to equate people with chaff to be burned. And it may not even be an allegory of burning away those sins we commit, at least not in the usual way we think of

it. Maybe it's not meant to be understood in the way I have long thought: as an example where the burning somehow exposed that which was most human in me in the worst sense.

No, today I'm wondering if maybe what John is giving us is a promise to burn away those things that keep a six-year-old from crying out in pain because he's ashamed and afraid. I'm wondering now if what needs to be burned away is the shame itself, the fear itself that leads to even children believing themselves to be somehow unworthy of the love of God which loves no matter what. I'm wondering today if the promise in John's words is that Jesus will come and simply sweep away that which keeps us from resting in and living out our grace-given beloved-ness. All those long-ingrained messages which tell us that we have to be strong. Or always competent. And certainly, never vulnerable and, no, not ever broken by what life has handed us. Always ashamed of our imperfections, always presenting to others a version of ourselves that really doesn't exist when it's just us and God, alone. Those things that keep us clinging to the past even though the past is just that, and we can never go back. But clinging keeps us from facing the future that always, always has God waiting on us..

Y'all, we have spent lifetimes building up that 'chaff' which we thought would protect us. Those defense mechanisms that keep vulnerability at bay, the hardness that protects us from the fear of getting hurt or being stung by another person. Those habits we've all developed that keep us safe but also keep us from growing. And to let go of all that, to allow the chaff to be burned away, well, that can feel like we are losing a part of ourselves, even an essential part. At least I know this is true for me, maybe it is for you, too? But today, thanks to Fr. Steve, I've finally seen this passage differently. When John speaks he is speaking of Jesus burning away that which is not needed, chaff which gets in the way, chaff that is just 'waste' anyway. All that chaff which does nothing to build up that which God wants built up *in* us and *through* us in the world. Now as I listen to John pointing to Jesus, I think that maybe the fire that Jesus brings is not used to endanger or punish, but actually to protect – to burn away all the stuff that sickens us and drags us down, to rid of us false self-protection and to make it possible finally for the stuff that remains to flourish.

And so, I think of these last couple of years, of all the changes and loss we've endured, and I wonder if Jesus is somehow using even this time to burn away the chaff within us and around us. That maybe God is giving us time during all this to see what is really, REALLY important. Not that COVID was intended for us, but that even in COVID, even in this awful time, there is still God and God's grace moving within us. Moving in each other. Here in community. And living in community with others living in community beside us, too. Each other, sharing burdens and fears and pains, sharing hopes and dreams and loves. Each other, rubbing against all those rough edges and rubbing them smooth. But also bringing our gifts to share and build and endure. All the while welcoming change and freedom and new growth. Each other. Standing together in the searing, burning light of God's love. For no other reason than that we are loved. Each of us, simply human. Simply imperfect human beings. Somewhere between broken and whole. And always, always loved no matter what.

Fr. Steve can write a sermon, now. But there's just one thing I want to add here at the end. That bit about burning away what we think protects us but actually limits us, that's a huge ask. I know that, and he knows that, too. It takes a lot of work, mostly in identifying what actually is chaff in the first place. Because sometimes we can be tempted to burn away what's healthy and sometimes we treasure what's not. But that's the work of this season, and thanks be to God, this is work we don't do alone. I'm

not asking you to stare in a mirror and pick out all the reasons you aren't good enough. I'm asking you and this church and my very own self to work through these things together. The author Rachel Held Evans says the most honest example of Christian community she ever witnessed was an AA group, because instead of coming together and holding up any number of facades, they came together under the first premise that all is not as it should be, and from there they could be open and honest and could lean on each other for the support it would absolutely take to make things whole.

This is what I'm asking of us all. Bring your chaff here and all that entails. And my promise to you is this: that chaff you bring may not be safe here, but you will be. And if Luke has anything to say about it, together we'll burn a little closer to God.