“The Winnower”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“What then should we do?”  Do you get the feeling sometimes that *we* make things far more difficult than they need to be? Life, with its unexpected difficulties, challenges to our sense of self, of family, of career, of place and purpose, can be difficult enough without our adding to it deep fears for our eternal future. Yet, somehow, from the promises and fulfillment we read about in scripture, we human beings have too often taken from it the notion that we are *not enough*, or that we—or more frequently that someone other than we—are damned. In this season of Advent waiting and Advent preparation, we may find ourselves focusing more on the chaff than the wheat; more on the sticks and leaves than on the berries, for those of us living in the center of the blueberry fields of Maine.

I may have told you before that I spent a considerable amount of time in my first year of ministry researching online and in printed publications the notion of hell and of damnation altogether. You see, very early in my new career, I heard from too many people a sense of Christianity’s judgment and too little about promise. So, I sought to understand why it was that I, thankfully, had grown up with a certain assurance of Jesus’s love and forgiveness, and of God’s saving grace. Even understanding that humanity, for all its advances in technology, in global expansion and in occasional embrace of difference, still seems focused most frequently on the things that divide us rather than unite us. We seem less concerned with being right with God than with being mighty. That is not the lesson we are meant to take from this season or from our teacher and savior, Jesus. This morning, therefore, I want to share with you just a bit about the moments and ideas that have felt most consequential this week.

I have always loved singing *The Messiah*, since first having the opportunity, probably in high school. Somehow, though, even with the familiar group of musicians and with George as director, I heard some of the familiar biblical text with greater significance lately. When the bass soloist, John, sang during rehearsal yesterday about the promise of light in the darkness, it was as though the map from the boardgame Risk was laid in front of me. There is so much that casts a shadow over our world today. We look for light. We look for rescue from war, from fear, from imprisonment. We also look for rescue from shame, from hunger and from disillusionment. We look for light and hope in our nation’s politics and in the world’s regard for the Other. And God’s promises to us are sure, so in the return of the Advent season or preparation, we may be praying for a return to hope and wonder what role we may play in it. Paul reminds us of one step. Pray so that in doing so we rejoice in the Lord always. No, Paul doesn’t say we are expected to rejoice in everything, all the time. Rather, we are to rejoice *in the Lord* always. Where everything else around us shifts and changes, and too often disappoints, God’s presence is sure. We are here now to remind each other of this.

I wonder how many of you, though, have heard more about God’s wrath and judgment than about God’s loving mercy. In this year’s Advent lectionary readings, we do hear a lot from John and from Jesus, too, about our need to get ourselves right with God, and you may have grown up hearing the very specific ways in which you have fallen short of the mark; or in words that have grown heavy with use, ways in which you have sinned. In today’s lesson from Luke, though, I find such a ray of light, such balm for the soreness of hearing news of eternal damnation that I invite you to remember with me, “what then shall we do?” And if you are, indeed, somehow motivated by the fear of damnation, I hope that you will know great relief to hear John spell out what we shall do to find ourselves rolling down the winnower toward joy, toward paradise, rather than wafted away with the chaff of judgment. “What then shall we do?” John makes it sound easy.

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To the tax collector, he says, ““Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you;” to the soldier, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” Maybe you also hear a bit of irony in the close of today’s scripture reading, “with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Exhortation as we hear it in scripture doesn’t often fall easily on the ear. But if we are looking for ways to feel close to God, or to act more closely in accordance with what God wants for the world, we can look at these several exhortations. What John rails against is not the people themselves, but against their greed. He asks that that—that we treat each other fairly, sharing wealth and practicing equity. What is the good news that *we* carry forward in our interactions with others? Not greed but generosity, not judgment but forgiveness, not war but carefully fostered peace. What would the winnower sift out from our lives? Anything that smacks of greed or of surety grown from violence. When we do so, we will know joy.

Holly Heardon, Professor Emerita of Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis writes of today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, “There are many things that can be a cause of rejoicing: good news; an unexpected reprieve; achievement of a hard-won goal. In some cases, the “joy” will be fleeting; where the cause of rejoicing has an enduring impact, the “joy” will continue. To “rejoice in the Lord always” points to a “joy” that is not only enduring, but that sustains us even when we are worn down by life challenges. This requires something more than seasonal cheerfulness. It is a “joy” rooted in an ongoing relationship, built on trust, that is able to negotiate the moments of joylessness in ways that ultimately work for good [You may hear in this echoes of Paul’s letter to the Romans in 8:35-39)].” Critical, here, is relationship: our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but also our relationship in community. For Paul, says Heardon, “rejoicing” is cultivated through mutual support.”

We need this good news. We need each other. We need God and we need God’s son, for whom we wait and prepare today. Following our prayers together and an invitation to give, you will hear two pieces from Handel’s *Messiah,* thanks to the generosity of our guest musicians. I invite you to listen closely to the lyrics, which is also an invitation—an invitation to rest in the knowledge of God’s love and Christ’s saving mission. What, then, shall we do? Amen.