

What Were You Hoping For?
Matthew 3:1-12 Romans 15:4-13

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Once again, Advent delivers us scripture that may not obviously resonate with our holiday vibe. John the Baptist shows up with some harsh words and disturbing images in the midst of our Christmas preparations. The ax is lying at the root of the trees, but not so we can cut them down, bring them home, and decorate them. We've got no open fires for roasting chestnuts, just unquenchable fires for burning chaff. And today we're supposed to be meditating on hope. "You brood of vipers!" John says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" I thought maybe with the magic of Christmas we could hope that "the wrath" wouldn't come at all. This makes it sound like the coming of this mysterious wrath is a sure thing, and the most we can hope for is to survive it.

When we're in survival mode, it's tempting to think in black or white, us or them, wheat or chaff. Let's all make sure we're all wheat, not like that pile of chaff over there. I'm reminded of an interview that Maris and I listened to recently with John Bucher, a specialist in mythology and storytelling. He was telling the interviewer that we have come to think of Aesop's fables all wrong. We tend to think of them as morality tales and strive to identify as the "more moral" character. We'd rather be the turtle than the hare. In fact, Bucher notes, Aesop's listeners would have understood the characters to be two sides of the same person. We each have turtle tendencies and hare habits and every moment we choose which one to embrace. We may think of our sacred stories as more than fables, and they do impart nuggets of spiritual morality, but I believe we have something to gain from sometimes reading our scripture through an Aesop lens.

In this case, it helps us see the hopeful truth in this otherwise troubling piece of Matthew's gospel. Because wheat and chaff are not two separate things. The chaff is a stiff indigestible husk that grows around the nutrient-rich wheatberry. In order for the wheat to become good fruit, the chaff must be removed. Likewise, most trees have some dead branches that need to be regularly pruned so the healthy branches can continue to flourish, can continue to produce good fruit. None of us are totally wheat or totally chaff, a completely healthy tree or a dead snag. We all have parts that need to be shed or pruned, even those of us who have committed ourselves to leading faithful lives. We all have good fruit and flourishing foliage, even those of us who don't have great track records.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a Soviet dissident who worked to raise awareness of political repression, writes about the human tendency to label people good or bad. He writes, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Evil,

or sin, is something that separates us from God and therefore separates us from love of ourselves and our neighbors. What better image for that thing that separates us than a tough husk we hide behind because we think it will protect us.

Advent is a time to prepare for the coming Christ child. Though it may sound more like the Lenten season than the Christmas season, John instructs us that the way to prepare is to repent. Sometimes this means noticing for the first time that we have been clinging to chaff. Sometimes it means the hard work of freeing ourselves from that chaff. It is not usually comfortable noticing or repenting, hence the impression of the coming Christ as the coming wrath.

Time for the tough part: most of us are at least somewhat aware of what personally closes us off or holds us back: fear, distrust, apathy. Name that thing - those things - and that's your chaff. Its protective quality is false. All it does is block the full spectrum of love from getting in and smother our participation in God's coming kingdom of justice and peace. Shedding that husk makes us vulnerable, hope makes us vulnerable. We relinquish the false sense that we can save ourselves, that we can protect ourselves with earthly methods. It requires faith and courage to trust in God's ways, not our own. But the upshot is that we may live in harmony with one another, that we may be filled with joy and peace, that we may abound in hope, and be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Now I tend to focus on how the gospel message is speaking to us as members of a national or global community. How do our actions and inaction impact those we may not feel obviously connected to? But some participants in Bible study this week helped me see John's instructions and the theme of hope in the context of our local church. They considered what it would mean for our church to have this kind of hope for the future. They reflected on the fact that to live in harmony with one another sometimes requires us to go through a refining fire. Noticing and naming the parts that are flourishing and producing good fruits and also noticing and naming the chaff that is preventing us from living fully into the kingdom of God. The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, so it would stand to reason that it cuts through the heart of every community made up of human beings. What are we as a local church required to repent of in order to prepare our community for the coming of the Christ child? What husks do we need to shed, what branches do we need to prune so that we may live in hope for the future? What difficult choices might we have to make, what uncomfortable conversations might we have to have? What hopeful vision for the future can we not yet see because we've been afraid of the painful yet purifying refinement process?

Christians are in a four-week season of Advent preparation; Center Harbor Congregational Church is in a couple years-long season of transition; the wider church is in a decades-long season of total upheaval. We are not alone in this liminal space. Church as an institution is not operating successfully with the same methods used 70 years ago. Things need to change for us to have hope for the future. Advent is a time to remind ourselves that repentance, a change of mind or a change of direction, is necessary for new life, for hope

for the future. We don't have to have it figured out by Christmastime, thank God. Christ will come whether we're ready or not. But we can examine our chaff, our unproductive branches, all year round. We may have been hoping to avoid the wrath of the refining fire. Turns out that's the only way forward. Turns out hope is found in the fact that we can be refined in new, life-giving ways.