

Date: 12/12/21

## What Should We Do?

Texts: **Zephaniah 3: 14-20**; **Luke 3: 7-18**; Fred Rogers, "Disabilities"

*"You people are snakes, low life, sneaky, dangerous, slithering personifications of evil! Your parents were snakes, you yourselves are snakes, your children will be snakes!"*

*"What makes you think being here will help? How did you get that idea? Who told you that? You think coming here is a get out of judgment card? Think again about that!"*

*"But don't even think about saying, 'My grandparents built this church, my parents kept it alive, and I've been coming here since I was a kid!' That's no good! That won't work! Why, God could make better parishioners out of these old pews than you people!"*

*"Fruit, that's what you need, spiritual fruit that shows you really have repented! Good deeds, good thoughts and a good life! Nothing less is going to cut it!"*

*"No fruit like this and you are outta here, chopped down, cut up, turned into firewood, and burned for heat on a cold winter's day! That's the ticket alright! That's what's going to happen to you if you don't change!"*

Okay, that wasn't really me speaking there, that was our friend, John the Baptist. I was just paraphrasing what he had to say to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, because I wanted you to hear how outrageous it would have sounded, how insulting it would have been, to those first crowds coming to hear John.

Vipers, axes, fires ... we can hear right over those words if we're not careful about it. They're just meaningless words when they are addressed to the crowds long ago. But when they're spoken to us, these words have bite! These words cut us up into little pieces! These words burn into our souls when we hear them addressed to us personally! "You're a low down dirty snake! What makes you think you can get away with anything? Who cares about your parents? Fiery destruction is about the best you can hope for!" Ouch! That hurts!

And this is what John was saying to his friends, or at least, to the people who were ready to follow his teaching! Yes, you heard that right! This is what John was saying to the people who were already coming out to be baptized. You might expect such insults to be thrown at complacent people to wake them up, at people who *weren't* listening, who weren't willing to give John the time of day, who were opposed to John. But that's not who gets it here! Nope, it's the people who are responding to his message! It's the people who made the long trip out from Jerusalem to listen to John! It's the people who are standing in line waiting to be baptized, for crying out loud! That's harsh!

Those who didn't just throw up their hands in despair and walk away, asked the natural next question: "What the heck should we do, then? How *do* we avoid this massive mess of fire coming our way?" And John's answer is just unbelievable. It's just incredible! To the crowds he just called viper babies he says, "Well, if you happen to have an extra coat, or maybe some extra food, why don't you share that with someone who doesn't." And to the vile tax collectors he says can't escape

God's wrath he replies, "How about if you just collect the amount you're supposed to from now on, and no more?" And to the soldiers who are going to be chopped down and thrown into the fire he says, "Don't use threats of violence to extort money anymore guys, and don't accuse people falsely. That's pretty bad, so don't do that anymore either." After the big build up, *this* is what you're asking me to do? Just this? Give my old clothes to Goodwill? Bring some food in to the food pantry? Don't try to get more than I'm due? Don't extort money, don't gossip, and then be happy with my pay? *That's it, John?* That's *all* I have to do? I mean, hey, I think I can actually do that! I was expecting a lot more! I was thinking, maybe give everything to the poor! I was thinking maybe pay back everything I stole, I was thinking more along the lines of resign my commission from the army.

But this stuff, this is easy, this I can do.

But hang on a minute, it's never that simple, is it? John isn't talking about doing it one time! He's talking about doing it every time, all the time! He's talking about a complete lifestyle change. Give to Goodwill *every* week! Bring in food *every* Sunday! *Never* take advantage of anyone! Avoid gossip *altogether!* *Never* use the power you have over someone else for your own good, but only for theirs!

Things that are easy to do *once*, are actually really hard to do *always!* John isn't talking about a good deed here or there; he's talking about a whole lifestyle that is *nothing but* good deeds, all the time! And that, that's not easy at all!

But it's the best that the old way can do. The old way has scary threats and an exhortation to do better. The old way has judgment, and the old way has fire that burns you up, and the old way says, "you have to be better, you have to work harder, you have to do more, you have to do it always and everywhere. You have to do it because if you don't, you will be cut down and thrown in the fire, because you are just useless old trees taking up space and not producing enough fruit." That's all the old way has. But John is not *just* a preacher of the old way, though he certainly is that! John's also a *pointer* to the *new* way.

Let me tell you what I mean. People were wondering if John might be the Messiah, but John says, "Um, no, I'm not that. All I can do is baptize you with water and put out the fire for a little bit. That's it! But that fire is going to start right up again, that fire of judgment, and you are going to be singed again before you know it. You won't be able to keep it up, and water will only go so far. What you need is not more water, but a better fire, a different fire! And that's what's coming, or rather, ...who's coming!"

"No," says John, "I'm not the Messiah, but I'm here to tell you that the Messiah is on his way and is almost here. Compared to him, I'm nothing, I'm not even good enough to untie his shoes. He's that great!

"I'm here to point to the Messiah, and when the Messiah really comes, he's not bringing just water to put out the fire for a little bit, he's bringing a new kind of fire, Holy Spirit fire, and that's even better! The old fire just burned up and destroyed, but Holy Spirit fire, it does much more. It's a purifying fire. It works like a threshing floor. You are all like wheat, and wheat is good and great and useful, but just like wheat, all the good stuff is covered up by useless chaff.

"It can't be good and it can't be great and it can't be useful until all that chaff is gone, until what's really inside is revealed for all to see. You can't be what you were born to be until you are freed from the chaff that is holding you in and holding you back.

“You can’t produce a harvest until the chaff is gone and the seed is revealed. When the Messiah comes, that’s what he’s going to do: he’s going to free you, he’s going to change you, he’s going to turn you into seeds that can produce a rich harvest of righteousness.

“When the Messiah comes, he’s going to take all the chaff in your life, all the chaff in your soul, all the chaff that holds you back. And he’s going to winnow that out of you so that all that is left is the good grain for a rich harvest. And then he’s going to burn that chaff up so that it never bothers you again.

“That’s what the Messiah’s going to do. No more fire of judgment, but a Holy Spirit fire of purification, a Holy Spirit fire of sanctification. A Holy Spirit fire that takes that wretched, sinful chaff in your life, that holds you back and keeps you down, and gets rid of it forever. A Holy Spirit fire that sets you free to be everything God created you to be.

“The one who’s coming isn’t going to exhort you endlessly to make yourselves better. You just can’t do it on your own! Not the way it has to be done to succeed that way, anyway. No, the one who’s coming is going to make you better by his own power and with his own Spirit. The old fire of judgment was going to burn *you* up, but the Messiah’s new fire of salvation is going to burn up only your sinfulness, leaving *you* behind to serve God in mercy, grace and love!”

“So what should you really do? Work harder? Do more? Change yourself? We hear that a lot, from all over, from parents and friends and teachers and preachers. Trying to change all by yourself will burn you up and burn you out. But God’s new way, the way of Christ, is to let Christ come along side you, to ask him in, and ask him to change you, to free you from what is holding you back, to send the Holy Spirit upon you to burn away the chaff that isn’t the real you anyway, and leave the best of you behind, the real you, the you that God dreamed of when God made you to be who you are. That’s what you should do!”

The people of John’s time were still waiting for the Messiah to come, but we have no need to wait any longer because the Messiah has come. Jesus the Messiah has been born in Jerusalem, Jesus the Messiah has lived and died for us, Jesus the Messiah is risen from the dead for us, and Jesus the Messiah has sent the Holy Spirit to us.

What should we do? Ask Jesus to come alongside us, to empower us with the Spirit, to change us with his presence, to enrich our lives – not by giving us more, but by taking away what’s holding us back. Give ourselves to Jesus in heart and body and soul, to be winnowed and freed, to be changed with his own power into the people God dreamt us to be.

We are not snakes; we are not vipers; we are the children of God. It’s time to take off the snake costumes and the viper outfits, take them off and throw them in the Spirit’s fire, because that is not who we are.

Because the Messiah came with the Spirit’s cleansing fire, we are the children of God. That’s who we are. So what should we do now? Be them. Be God’s children, and change the world with God’s love, which cleanses everything.

Amen