

"The Ax at the Root of the Trees"

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⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. (Luke 3:7-18)

When it comes to Christmas decorating, we have a pretty clear division of labor in our house. Stephanie is the director – she is responsible for the overall creative vision. But there is one aspect of the process over which I have primary creative control, and that is the lighting. You might say that, in our production, I am the gaffer, the head electrician and technician responsible for lighting design and execution. Most of this effort, of course, goes into the Christmas tree. This sacred duty, as I see it, is a beautiful medley of science and art. Putting the lights on the tree with Christmas music playing in the background is one of my most cherished parts of the season.

Not so much, though, when the season is over. When the lights go on the branches are supple and gentle. When they come off in early January, the branches are so brittle and dry that they cut my hands. I am paying the price for wrapping the lights so tightly around the inner branches. And, when the de-lighting process is done, I assume another role on our production team. I am also the lumberjack – the guy who gets the ax and busts the dry husk of our former tree down into kindling. At this point, that's all it's good for – dry wood to be tossed into the fire.

That is the image that comes to mind as I hear this story of John the Baptist, railing away in the wilderness, warning people to get ready, because the One who is coming in the name of the Lord is coming to do some chopping. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees," John says. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit [will be] cut down and thrown into the fire... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire... [he will] gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

It's kind of a jarring message on this side of Christmas. The vibe of December is to jump very quickly to the end. It is much more focused on angels and shepherds and the babe in the manger, even wise men who really didn't show up for a good while after Jesus was born. John doesn't fit into that gentle pastoral scene. Instead, this wild guy out in the desert is intent on pushing an inconvenient and difficult message. Yes, there is good news... there are good things coming... but



John preaches that we cannot forget the work we have to do now if we want to greet the Messiah later in the way the Messiah deserves to be greeted.

The art on the cover of your bulletins this morning, which depicts John as the “Angel of the Desert,” indicates the seriousness of it all. He is holding his own head in a chalice. And if you look closely at the bottom right corner, you see a small tree with an ax leaning precariously at the roots. Even in the warm glow of the season, it is hard to soften the sharp edge of John’s message. He wants us to wrestle with a scary question: Could we be one of those unfortunate trees that are destined for the ax?

In asking this question, we are interpreting John’s comment as if each person, each one of us, is an individual tree. If our life does not bear good fruit, then our life will be cut off. Unfortunately, we cannot really discount this aspect of what John may be saying – that his call to repentance does point to an ultimate judgment of some kind.

But I believe there is another way to interpret John’s call – one that sees Jesus as more than just an axe-wielding agent of divine wrath. I cannot help but notice that the ax in that old icon on your bulletin is untended. It is also at rest. Its weight is being held up in the crook of a lower branch. Yes, the ax lies close to the tender roots of the tree. Yes, future chopping is possible. But when John was preaching his message of repentance in the wilderness the world did not yet know the true nature of the divine woodsman – the Savior who would be the only one who could lay claim that weapon... the only one worthy to pick it up and decide how he might use it.

I can’t help but think of the way Jesus, especially in the gospel of Mark, would tell people to keep his identity a secret. When he healed someone, and they saw his power, he would tell the healed person not to talk about it. When demons said, “We know who you are!”, Jesus would order them to be quiet. The question is why? Why not let people say that he was the Messiah? Why would he not want people to tell this good news to everyone they could? John the Baptist was already a rock star. He was pulling in huge crowds... *in the desert!* Everyone was coming out to hear him preach, and he was just the opening act. Why not build the hype for the main event? What purpose could the secrecy serve?

My theory is that Jesus did not want them to tell the story because they would not tell it right. They wouldn’t tell it right because they had only seen the early chapters. It would be too easy to jump to conclusions before the whole story was told... because whatever they thought a Messiah might be... whatever assumptions they would make about a divine king – how he would wield power, how he would hold people accountable or offer mercy, how he would heal or not heal or execute final judgment – all of those assumptions would be shattered by the cross. No one saw the cross coming. No one could have seen how far the world would go to keep the power of Jesus in a manageable space. And no one could have seen how far God would go in the name of love. No one would have ever envisioned the Messiah nailed up on a dead tree. The cross changed the whole story. So Jesus tried to keep it quiet, until they had a chance to see the end of the story.

The story of the ax changes in the same way. We might think we know what that ax is all about, but how could that story not be changed by Easter Sunday? If a tomb can be transformed into a symbol of resurrection, then what happens to an ax?

Here is the point I am really trying to make: What if the ax is not an instrument of final death, but rather a gardening tool? What if each of us is not a single tree, but more like a forest? What if the work of the one about to be born is not to be an executioner, but one who comes to prune away the parts of us that are diseased, dried out, skewed, or broken? What if the Savior plans to wield that ax not to end a life but to make life healthier, better and stronger?

Looking back at the icon on your bulletin, the ax is clearly present. But it is also alone and untended. It is at rest. It is not the central part of the message – it is off to one side, down in the

corner. And, last but not least, the verb John uses to describe that ax is *passive*. The ax is not actively at work. It is more like a symbol of something that is to come, but remains uncertain how, or when, or where, or even why. These are things we are invited to ponder as the story that is about to unfold actually unfolds, so that when the time comes to tell the whole story, we can tell it right.

Are we convinced that the ax will be drawn by an agent of holy wrath, come to cut all the dead wood out of the world like so much kindling for the fire? Or do we think the divine woodsman looks at us more like a garden, a vineyard, or a vibrant forest? Will the ax be used by a master gardener, an agent of love who is coming to tend to his creation... to seek out and save the lost... to bring the prodigal home... to joyfully reconcile a hurting world with the Creator whose very nature is faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love?

It is important to say that, even if we believe that the ax is a tool of an agent of love, it does not mean that the story will, at every turn, be easy. It does mean, however, that the story will have a happy ending. Pruning can hurt. Rooting out the diseased parts of our lives can be painful. But, when that gardening is done in the name of love, the end result can be beautiful.

In his well-known work *The Prophet*, the inspirational writer Kahlil Gibran urges us to seek out and follow the story of love. “*When love beckons to you, follow him,*” he writes.

“When love beckons to you, follow him, though his ways are hard and steep. And when his wings enfold you yield to him, though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you. And when he speaks to you believe in him, though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you, so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning. Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun, So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth. Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself. He threshes you to make you naked. He sifts you to free you from your husks. He grinds you to whiteness. He kneads you until you are pliant; And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God’s sacred feast. All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life’s heart.”¹

“*Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees,*” John says. The Divine Lumberjack is coming, and we are not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He comes with the power of the Holy Spirit, and he comes with fire. But, as the angels and the prophets say, “Fear not.” He has plans for us, but they are plans for our welfare, not for our destruction. He is likely to do a little pruning, but only because he loves us.

So, this Advent, as love beckons to you, follow him, though his ways are hard and steep, for in him we might just discover the secrets of our hearts, and in that knowledge become a fragment of God’s own heart.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

¹ <https://www.themarginalian.org/2018/07/13/kahlil-gibran-prophet-love/>