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St. James', Mt. Airy  
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Advent 3/C  
Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Canticle 9 – First Song of Isaiah  
Philippians 14:4-7  
Luke 3:7-18

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion,  
Shout, O Israel!*

*Surely, it is God who saves me;  
I will trust in God and not be afraid.*

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*

When looking at the start of each of today's scripture passages, it seems as if one of these things is not like the others.

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Today, on the third Sunday of Advent, we are deep into this season of waiting and preparation.

Known as *Gaudate* Sunday – as *Gaudate* is the Latin word for rejoice, which begins our Epistle – we might ask ourselves, what is there to rejoice about in today’s Gospel, is this really Good News that John proclaimed?

Vipers, repentance, the winnowing fork and threshing floor, unquenchable fire. These are what John the Baptizer comes bearing.

But not only those. He also brings compassion and justice: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.”

John shows us both chaff and wheat.

All of these are symbols for the second coming of Christ, and the promise that when Christ comes there will be judgement.

Most often when we read this passage and think of such judgement, we believe that what is being said is that the good will be sorted from the bad, and the good will get to be with God, but the bad will be sent to the fiery halls of hell.

And that’s one way to read it. A popular one even.

But it’s not the only way.

What if, instead of each person being *either* wheat *or* chaff, we are always *both* wheat *and* chaff?

When I look out at the world and all that is going on it is sometimes easy for me to see it in the stark contrast of black and white – good and evil – even though I know it is more complex than that intellectually.

When I look at those I know, and indeed myself, it is a bit easier to see the various shades of gray – the ways in which we operate with God’s love at our center, and the ways in which we don’t.

It is then that I can acknowledge that we, and indeed I, are neither fully wheat nor chaff, but both.

It brings to mind for me a children’s book that I stumbled over many years ago that I have returned to again and again. It’s called the *Seven Lonely Places*, *Seven Warm Places*, and it’s a book about vices and virtues.<sup>1</sup>

Using first the classic language of the “seven deadly sins” – pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony and sloth – the book walks children (and their adults) through how acting upon such impulses puts them in a chaffy, lonely place.

Greed takes you where it’s always empty, no matter how much you stuff in, and you say, “I just have to have it all and everything and nothing is enough and no one can have anything but me.”

Anger scrunches your heart into a tiny lump of charcoal and bursts all your insides out before you know what happens. Then you look around empty and all alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Boulton, April. *Seven Lonely Places, Seven Warm Places: The Vices and Virtues for Children*. St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003.

Envy is a foggy place like a deep dark swamp where what you have shrinks and fades and what your friend has grows big and bright so what you have is not enough and you want what your friend has. What you have becomes dim as shadows.

But there are also wheaty, warm places. These are the virtues of prudence, justice, courage, temperance, faith, hope, and charity.

Justice divides your peanut butter sandwich into a zillion parts for the children who don't have any lunch. Justice is the place where you see everyone must have what they need.

With temperance the world is a great and wonderful place and you need only a small bit of it so there will be some left over for all the other people and for tomorrow.

With hope you see the bad things in the world and you see how God will help you make them better.

Sometimes things that are beyond our control put us in lonely or warm places. These can be both random chance and the structures in our world which succeed only when some are oppressed and exploited.

But more often than not, it is our day to day choices – and those we make over a lifetime – that put us in lonely or warm places.

Because humans are good – we are made in the likeness of God – but we are not God – and so we sometimes get it wrong.

This is why we read about John the Baptizer in Advent, and it's why today's Gospel is indeed Good News.

It is Good News when the crowds asked John, "What then should we do?" and he told them, and us, exactly what to do: do not use your power to injure.

It's as simple and hard and powerful as that – choose the warm places, not the lonely ones.

But it is also Good News when John speaks of the one who will come with the winnowing fork in his hand, clearing the threshing floor to gather the wheat into his granary, while burning the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Because that is us – all of each of us.

We won't be sorted into good and bad, with some arbitrary line of goodness we hope to sneak across.

No, the promise is that when Christ comes in judgement, he will burn away all that is in us that draws us away from the love of God, of each other, and of creation.

Our chaff will be winnowed, and what will be left will be pure wheat, gathered into the household of God.

We don't have to be perfect, we only have to prepare our hearts for the longing, preparation, and hope of the season.

So on this third Sunday of Advent, join me, fellow vipers, and sing and shout! For surely it is God to saves us, and trusting that we have nothing to fear. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!

~ AMEN ~