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St. James', Mt. Airy  
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Advent 3C  
Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Canticle 9 (Is 12:2-6)  
Philippians 4:4-7  
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.**

Nothing says 9 days till Christmas quite like John the Baptist's proclamation, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" and the dire warnings that follow. ☺

I say that partly tongue in cheek, but also because there really is something hopeful in midst of what appears to be John's angry prophetic rantings – and hope is after all one of the most important gifts of Christmas.

Last week John preached the necessity to prepare for the coming of the messiah. This week he preaches repentance as the center of that preparation.

For John the Baptist repentance meant a change of mind, heart, and life – literally turning your whole being around to face God anew and putting God at your center.

John proclaimed that it wasn't enough to just belong to a religious group, but that it's what you do that matters – what he called "bearing fruit" – which is to share your abundance with the vulnerable and do everything with honesty, integrity, and respect.

And then he warned of the one coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire and his winnowing fork to separate the wheat and the chaff, which will be burned with unquenchable fire.

Stick with me here – because that's the root of hope in today's Gospel.

So often we think of this separation of the wheat and the chaff, and the destruction of the chaff, as a negative – some people are good, and some people are bad, and at the end of time heaven and hell blah, blah, blah.

But I'm guessing some of you who grew up on and around farms might know why the separation is a good thing.

You see, every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers use wind to separate these husks (known collectively as chaff) from the grain – the goal being to save every grain, not to separate the good grain from the bad grain.<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is a metaphor of preservation and purification, not division and destruction.

What the wind and fire remove are the impurities: the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that keep us from “bearing fruit” – that make us less generous, less fair, or less respectful of others.

Russian writer Alexandr Solzhenitsyn had it right when we wrote that there is a line between good and evil, but it doesn't run between groups; it runs through the heart of each person.

The promise of baptism and the Holy Spirit are that they work to counteract our human tendencies to bear bad fruit, and instead purify us to bear good fruit.

The Holy Spirit comes in wind and fire not to destroy but to refine and restore, to make us radiant children of God.

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<sup>1</sup> The Salt Project Lectionary Commentary

This is what Christmas is about, the good news of great joy for all people: Jesus came that we might be saved and restored. Our work is to prepare – to repent – to bear fruit – all grounded in the hope of the Spirit, and that we do it with God’s help.

For that, this third Sunday in Advent, we always rejoice – offering thanks and embracing the anticipatory of joy of the coming of God to be with us in the birth of Christ.

~ AMEN ~