

Julian has reached the stage where he loves testing out his voice. Occasionally, he'll let out the loudest scream, or a series of screams—not because he's upset, but simply to hear the sound. You can imagine that sometimes it's alright for him to do that, and sometimes it's not. And sometimes mommy has had a long day, and it immediately gets under my skin.

In those moments, I'm tempted to echo John the Baptist and shout, "You brood of vipers!" Of course, that's neither a productive nor a kind response. John the Baptist often gets paired with this third Sunday of Advent, which is *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is simply the Latin for "rejoice," so on this Sunday the candle we light is pink and stands for joy. Some churches even have rose vestments for this day to note it as a special day of joy in the Advent season. So, it's funny that in walking backwards through Advent as we do, this is also the Sunday we are most likely to hear from John. John has something of a reputation for being prickly. Knowing he spent long stints on his own in the wilderness goes a long way towards explaining why.

But John isn't abrasive just for the sake of it—he's a truth-teller. His time in solitude brought him clarity, and when he sees us behaving poorly—our tempers flaring when our toddlers scream in our ears, or someone cuts us off in traffic, or more seriously, when we intentionally cause ill rather than good—he doesn't sugarcoat his response. He calls us to stop and to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

What's striking about this passage is how Luke and John frame God's work as something deeply communal. When John warns that the axe is lying at the root of the tree, it's not an individual threat. We are not isolated trees, accountable only for ourselves. Instead, we are branches of a larger tree, and the whole tree suffers when we fail to care for all its parts.

Just as striking is how the people respond to John's message of repentance. They ask, "What then should we do?" They want to make things right. Luke shows a yearning for something more, something different. John gives three very specific examples that point all of us towards a more loving community.

I discovered this week that when Julian gets into a screaming cycle, if I say very softly, "Mommy needs some quiet right now." He actually listens. I nearly laughed out loud when his full-throated screams didn't simply stop, but turned into comical whispers. Julian is starting to become aware of others—not all the time, of course. He's still too young to fully grasp the needs of those around him, but he understands, in some small way, that he's part of a family. He even wants to help; he just doesn't always know how or pause long enough to notice what's needed. Our job is to teach him how to be part of a loving community.

That's the same goal we have as Christians. It's the essence of our two most visible sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist. Both draw us together and remind us to

care for one another. The repentance John calls us to isn't about feeling guilty—it's about turning away from self-centeredness and toward a life of love and service. This work is ongoing. Day by day, week by week, we strive to live out this call, and God doesn't leave us to do it alone.

The end of our passage again looks forward to Jesus, and Jesus' ministry among us. At first glance, John's words about the advent of Jesus can seem alarming: the Messiah, coming to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire, winnowing fork in hand, ready to sift the wheat and burn the chaff. It's a dramatic image, and not the kind of help most of us would eagerly seek. But I think this passage is misunderstood.

When we hear about the wheat and the chaff, we might imagine it as a sorting of people—some are wheat, others are chaff, and we'd better hope we're the wheat, otherwise we're headed for eternal fire. But that's not quite right. Chaff is part of the wheat itself. It's the outer covering that protects the grain. Once the wheat matures, the chaff is no longer needed. So, rather than seeing wheat and chaff as representing different people, we should see them as parts of ourselves. We all have wheat, and we all have chaff. Jesus comes to sift us, to thresh us, and to burn away the chaff so that only the fruit remains.

John calls everyone to a baptism of repentance—a turning away from what hinders us and a turning toward God. This is grace, not judgment. This image of Jesus sifting the wheat from the chaff isn't meant to send certain people to hell—those who have failed to do the work of God. It is meant to burn away everything that is not fruit, to refine us, until only the Kingdom of God can be seen in us. As we answer God's call, the Holy Spirit helps us release what doesn't matter, enabling us to bear fruit worthy of God's Kingdom. This is both our help and our joy.

John reminds us that the Kingdom of God is here, and it's time to live differently. The Holy Spirit empowers us to do so. God refines and molds us until love shines through every part of who we are. So, offer up your wheat to God. Let the chaff fall away, piece by piece, until all that remains is the fruit of God's Kingdom.