

# **“The Wheat and the Chaff” by Erica Lloyd**



## **Epiphany/Baptism of Jesus**

**January 9, 2022**

Let me start off with an apology: I’m not preaching about the wise men or the star or anything in the gospel reading you just heard! When I reached out to Deborah about preaching, I hadn’t realized we would be celebrating Epiphany this Sunday and would not be reading from the normal gospel selection from the lectionary. Deborah encouraged me to go ahead – and if I had any lingering doubts about sticking with this sermon, they were put to rest when I discovered Marjory had shared a gospel reflection for Inward/Outward yesterday on the very same theme, without either of us knowing what the other was

thinking.

So, since you haven't heard it yet, let me take a moment and share with you the lectionary reading that I will be preaching from, Luke chapter 3, verses 15-22: *As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John 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. His 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."* Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I know "the point" of this passage is Jesus's baptism, but reading this, what grabbed my attention was mention of the wheat and the chaff. "To separate the wheat from the chaff" is a Biblical image that has become a common idiom – to separate the valuable from the worthless, or as Merriam-Webster defines: "to judge which people or things in a group are bad and which ones are good."

Indeed, this is always how I had interpreted this verse – John is warning that Jesus is coming to judge us, folks. And while this part wasn't always said out loud, the implication was: some of y'all will be saved, and some of y'all are headed for that everlasting fire.

The problem is, none of that sounds right to me. I don't believe in hell, nor in the kind of God who would send people

there. Also, it doesn't actually seem to be a good description of what Jesus did, at least from the accounts of his ministry that have survived. Sure, he got into some heated debates, but the part where Jesus burns up the bad guys for eternity seems conspicuously absent from all the Gospels I've read. So either John got his prophesy really wrong, or I was missing something.

It was my pastor in Haiti from whom I first heard a different interpretation. The chaff, he explained, is not a weed, nor is it wheat gone bad. Chaff is *part* of the wheat – an outer covering that protects the grain as it grows. And while the chaff must indeed be removed for the grain to be used, it is just the process of shedding protection that is no longer needed or useful.

This... makes a lot more sense to me. Perhaps John is saying NOT that Jesus is going to save some and condemn others, but that he's calling all of us to leave behind the protective shells that no longer serve us. Marjory's reflection yesterday quoted from Elizabeth O'Connor's book, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*, where O'Connor writes about the image of a "hulled heart" that came to her in a dream. She asks: "What are the hard, protective casings around my heart that must be stripped away to reach the hidden grain? What must I give up to lie bare and exposed like peas in a pod or corn on a cob? What are the wrappings that keep the essence of my life from becoming bread for the world?"

As I reread this gospel passage, I started thinking about what those shells are – the things that, deep down, we trust to keep us safe, to protect us against the vagaries of life.

In recent years, some evangelical Christians have made it quite clear: they trust their guns. And I'm going to go out on a limb and say that for most of us in this congregation, we find that abhorrent. But if I'm being honest, I have my own weapons of self-defense, albeit ones that are perhaps more

palatable in this community: my money (humble though it may be), my competence, notions of my own goodness. These are the things that, when push comes to shove, I believe will keep me safe and happy. And as such, these are things to which I devote considerable time and energy and brainspace. These are the things I cling to.

And therein perhaps lies the problem. None of things I look to for protection are necessarily bad in and of themselves, but it is my attachment to them that can cause problems.

As Paul tells Timothy, it's the *love* of money that tempts our hearts to greed. It's the *love* of our own goodness and competence – that is, our pride – that makes us immune to wisdom and indifferent to grace. Indeed, whatever your things are – your good looks, your reputation for being agreeable, your intellect, whatever! – when we trust these things to protect us, we lose the capacity to hold them lightly. Instead we take them so seriously, we hang on with all our might – a “deathgrip” in the truest sense of that word. And it's to our own detriment – when our hands are full of these things, we have no room to receive the good gifts that God wants to share with us.

You see, the problem with our protective shells is that they tend to be a bit indiscriminate. They may do a decent job keeping out the bad stuff, but too often they protect us from the good stuff too: opportunities to experience generosity, humility, simplicity, and compassion. Opportunities to see ourselves and others in a different light. Opportunities to cultivate courage, to practice patience, to nourish the little budding fruits of the Spirit in our lives.

And it is precisely these experiences Jesus insists we not miss.

So he calls the rich young man to sell all of his belongings, because his ideas of sufficiency are protecting him from

seeing his own need. He calls Martha to set down the busyness that is shielding her from being seen and tended to by the people who love her. He calls Peter to lay aside all of his preconceived notions of what a Messiah is so that he can see the one who is actually in front of him. He calls the tax collectors away from their ill-gotten gains, the Pharisees away from their traditions so that they can see how straightforward it can be to love their neighbors.

I'm not sure I could ever see Jesus consigning any of these people – repentant or not – to burning hellfire for eternity. But I can *absolutely* imagine Jesus saying, "Please, let your utter dependence on this thing go up in flames. If you're ready, I will build the fire, and we can watch this chaff go up in smoke together."

Is this what it means to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and fire?

Let me be clear that I find this idea terrifying. I'd like to be the kind of person who trusts in God alone – but burning just seems like such a permanent way to go about it.

Baptizing in water, now there's nothing there to stop me from rolling in the mud again. But baptism by fire – well, once that chaff is tossed into the flames there's no salvaging it. So this idea is *very* uncomfortable. But I can't ignore that most of the people who let those protective shells burn when Jesus called seemed better off for it.

And this is what gives me courage to burn a little chaff this morning.

About nine months ago, I learned that the pastor I mentioned at the start of this sermon, the one who transformed this image of the wheat and the chaff for me, the one whose insights into scripture changed my understanding in many ways for which I am deeply grateful, the one who led the little church community that sustained me throughout my years in

Port-au-Prince – I learned that that pastor was accused, credibly, horrifically, of abusing his adopted Haitian children.

All abuse is evil, but to harm children who had already lived through the pain of losing their birth parents, whose worlds had literally crumbled to pieces in the earthquake – my blood boils at the thought that he inflicted further trauma on these kids. When I found out, I was so angry at what he had done to them. And as time passed, I realized I was angry on behalf of myself and my friends, too. Everything about that beautiful, wonderful little church that held me up through some of the lowest points in my life now felt tainted. I was heartbroken and disgusted and furious.

That fury, as it turns out, was very protective. It helped distract from the sadness. Anger doesn't always feel powerful but it usually feels less helpless than grief.

The other thing that felt protective was distancing myself from the situation as much as possible.

In general, I don't put much stock in my "reputation" – I care quite a bit about what my friends and family and coworkers think of me, but one of the precious gifts I learned from my mother was not to give too much thought to the opinions of strangers. But in Haiti, how people saw me felt important – in the absence of functioning institutions, my sense of security felt tied to my community; if people think well of me they will help make sure I'm ok. So I made an effort to be a "good" foreigner: I speak Creole; I take public transportation; I'm vocal about expressing my outrage at the never-ending examples of foreign exploitation in Haiti. Until this.

Not long after the allegations became public, a Haitian journalist reached out to me for an interview. I had no idea how he connected me to the pastor, nor how he had obtained my contact information. I was terrified and did not know what to

do: on the one hand, I wanted to unequivocally condemn what the pastor had done; on the other, I really did not want to attach my name to anything about this. In the end, I took refuge in a friend's argument that keeping the story in the news would likely be detrimental to the kids' wellbeing – and while I think that's probably true, I also know that I clung to that principle as more ethical cover for the main reason I wanted to ignore the journalist, namely, staying as far away from this abhorrent situation as possible.

So it feels uncomfortable, dangerous even, to acknowledge publicly not only that I knew him and trusted him before this awful abuse came to light, but also somehow there are still aspects of his spiritual teaching that I hold onto, even after all that I've found out about what he's done, even now when I hope he spends the rest of his life in jail. I find myself wondering if the Holy Spirit can speak through someone even when they are in the midst of committing the darkest sins? I don't know, I don't think so, and yet, here I am.

None of this makes sense to me. To be honest, I'm not sure why I need to shed these particular protective shells, what I've been missing out on that Jesus really thinks is unmissable, what good it will do me, or what good it will do anyone for that matter. I only know that something in me said it was time. That *this* is the baptism I'm being called to right now, no matter how precarious it feels.

And then I went back and read that passage one more time, and this time I was reminded: that baptism is not *only* of fire. According to John, Jesus offers a baptism of fire *and the Holy Spirit*. The Spirit herself, the one who's named Comforter and Advocate, is part and parcel of this. No matter how lonely it is to let the old things burn, the Spirit will stay beside us, hold our hand and remind us we are strong enough to withstand the heat. We do not have to do this by ourselves. As if to prove the point, there's Jesus, getting dunked in the river right alongside everyone else, if only to remind us that, on

this journey, there's not a single step that we have to take alone.

God is with us. Amen.