

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Second Sunday of Advent  
December 9, 2007

### **A Threat or A Promise?**

Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10

In these sparkle season days of tinsel town holiday shopping cheer,  
it is always a little off-putting to hear this very  
un-Christmassy ranting of John the Baptist.

Even my computer knows what I mean:  
Do you know my spell check actually knows the word Christmassy!

I wonder what the definition of Christmassy might be?  
Whatever it is, it is probably not akin to words like  
*Repent, Brood of Vipers, and burning with unquenchable fire.*  
Perhaps the *axe lying at the root of the trees might come closer,*  
if it's a pretty, cone shaped evergreen he means.

But isn't this the season of peace and goodwill for all people?  
Don't we have a hard enough time getting ready for the holidays  
without all this fire and brimstone?  
What's with this bah-humbug outlook?  
How about a little Christmassy Spirit, John!?

After all, is Christmas a promise or a threat? .....

Then again, on second thought,  
maybe I have heard some version of John the Baptist at the mall  
during holiday shopping season...

You better watch out, You better not cry  
You better not pout. I'm telling you why.  
Santa Clause is coming to town.

A Promise or a Threat?

"Jump in the bed and cover you head"

Even worse, there's the Pittsburgh version...

Yinz better wahtch aht  
Yinz better not paht  
Yinz better not cry,  
I'm tellin yinz (hauscome?)  
Santa Claus is comin dahntahn

Whether it's Pittsburghese, or the Fred Coots 1934 original,  
or as far back as John the Baptist,  
it seems there has always been a little Threat  
involved with Christmas.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's always been true that the Gospel  
could be either good or bad news  
depending on where you locate yourself in the story.

The news announced Moses announced in Egypt  
was good news if you were an Israelite slave  
who wanted to escape Egypt.  
If you were Pharaoh, or an Egyptian, the news was pretty bad  
pretty threatening – flies, blood, and death,  
not to mention the economic disaster of the nation  
one they lost all that free labor.

If you were an Israelite in the days of the prophets  
the news about Babylon or Assyria  
being used against you to accomplish God purpose,  
might come as good news to the Babylonians  
but mighty bad news to the people of Israel.

John the Baptist preaches in this same prophetic tradition.  
Is his preaching a Promise or a Threat?  
Well, it depends on whether you are a Pharisee or Sadducee,  
measuring your righteousness  
and making sure you keep yourself on God's good list,  
'cause he's checking in twice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then there is the Messiah who is promised in Isaiah

the One on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests.  
The Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might and...  
*of the fear of the Lord.*

Even more, *his delight is in the fear of the Lord...*  
*...but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,*  
*and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;*  
*he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,*  
*and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

So John is just following in good prophetic form when he cries out,  
*His winnowing fork is in his hand,*  
*and he will clear his threshing floor*  
*and will gather his wheat into the granary;*  
*but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

The coming of God is an awesome and terrible event.  
The message of John the Baptist truly is,  
"You had *better* watch out!"

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In these days of psychological sophistication  
we are skeptical of religion that builds itself on fear,  
and rightly so.  
Fear breeds every sort of human malady,  
from ulcers to addiction to perfectionism to paranoia,  
and finally violence toward others and the self.  
What could possibly good about fearing God?

Well, perhaps the good thing about  
the fear of God and the threat of God's coming  
is that this fear *properly arises* from believing  
that there is a difference between right and wrong,  
and that God knows, and cares about,  
this difference.

There are lines in human life and relationships which we ought not to cross.  
These lines determine the difference between  
naughty or nice on the mild end,  
and morally reprehensible or virtuous on the extreme end.

The preaching of John the Baptist reminds us that  
that line still matters,

and God knows where we stand,  
on the side of naughty or nice,  
hoarding or generous,  
destructive or life-giving,  
compassionate or apathetic,  
good or evil.

And certainly we want this line to remain, do we not?

That is, if we care to live in a universe with some moral order.  
John proclaims the Advent of a God who demands accountability.  
His words come as a *threat* because  
we have all transgressed God's justice.  
But his words also come as a *promise*  
because to have a God who does not care about righteousness  
is to be hopelessly afloat in a universe  
with no order, no purpose, no goodness, no love.

John announces the good news that life is not meaningless.  
There is truth, there is justice,  
and the One who is coming will reveal this truth and justice to us.

\* \* \* \* \*

The late Henri Nouwen,  
20<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic,  
noticed how it is not very easy for us to truly desire  
the second coming of Christ.  
We have much invested in this life.  
We are working hard to build something for ourselves on this earth.  
So we live in a paradox.  
We want God near, but we feel threatened by God's nearness,  
because God might want something else for us  
than what we are building.  
Nouwen suggests that Christian maturation happens as that fear,  
that slow, persistent fear becomes mingled with desire for God,  
and is finally transformed into full blown hope.  
In this sense, the fear of God does not contradict God's mercy.

It is true, we who follow Christ have much to lose.  
Christ calls us to lose our lives, or more accurately, to give them up.  
But it is not until we face the threat of deep loss,  
and give ourselves over to it,  
that we will find the joyous promise of God fulfilled  
in the blessing that awaits us on the other side of deep loss.

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The image of our loss is that of the harvest  
brought in for threshing.

The One who is coming into the world, says John,  
will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.  
Wind and Fire.

Like a farmer gathering the wheat and separating it from the chaff,  
God actively works to sort out the worthless from the good,  
and to preserve the good.

The method of threshing in those days  
involved a winnowing fork  
which a farmer used to pitch straw into the air  
inside the barn which is open on both sides.

When the straw is pitched,  
the lighter weight chaff lingers in the air  
and the wind that blows through the barn and blows out the chaff,  
while the heavier wheat falls to the floor,  
and is held in and preserved by the threshold.

The chaff blown outside the barn is then gathered and burned up.  
The baptism of wind and fire.

But here's the good part of this news.  
John says the wind and fire of the Coming One is our baptism.  
And baptism is a symbol of both dying and rising.  
If we are baptized, we are claimed by God, owned by God,  
held and preserved by God.

The good news is,  
each of us are both wheat and chaff.  
No one can ever be reduced to mere chaff, but is always a mixture,  
for we are God's good creation.  
In Christ, the chaff of our lives will be blown away and burned up,  
while the good grain, the wholesome wheat, will be saved.  
Baptism proclaims the final redeemable goodness of God's field.

This is the Promise of Christmas,  
our fervent hope in this season of Advent waiting.  
This is also the Threat of Christmas,  
because we have become too attached to our chaff,

and we want to keep it.

You'd better watch out, says John,  
because the day is coming  
when you will not be able to keep you chaff.

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So the question is,  
What do you fear about the coming of God?  
What chaff would God burn away from your life?  
If you had to stand before God ,  
and before all the eyes of your family and community,  
and watch your life in full color, on a wide, high-def,  
flat screen,  
and account for all that you and God and others see,  
would you be ready?  
Is this a threat or a promise?

It is both, of course.  
But what we finally discover,  
in the One who comes at Christmas  
is that the threat and the promise,  
are the fruit of God's Love.  
And Perfect Love casts out Fear.

In this season of Advent waiting,  
John invites us to enter in to this Paradox of Love and Fear,  
until we find it finally resolved  
in the child  
who gives his life for the world.