



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Come O Unquenchable Fire Come The Baptism of our Lord 192022

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Well, maybe it's just me, but when I hear that Jesus is coming to separate the wheat from the chaff and then throw the chaff into the unquenchable fire - maybe it's just me, but I'm not getting that warm and fuzzy feeling. I mean, what image comes to your mind when you hear that?

I read this earlier in the week and I have to admit, I pictured this kind of crazed Jesus with wild hair and flames and smoke coming out of His eyes and like a big red pitchfork. And He's hurling people over His shoulder, into the flames of eternal hell. That's what came to my mind. And that would make for a heck of an icon, wouldn't it? Where's that bulletin cover? I'd love to see Rembrandt's depiction of that image.

I have to say, what really struck me was I was surprised at myself. I mean, where was this coming from? I wasn't raised in a fire and brimstone kind of church. That's never been my understanding of Jesus. Did I just kind of pick this up from cultural osmosis? Or maybe I have some kind of subconscious fear that deep down all this talk of grace and forgiveness and unconditional love, maybe that's all just too good to be true.

And so I did some Googling to see what the rest of the world was saying about this metaphor. And sure enough, out of more than 9 million results on Google, the number one most popular listing had this to say: the phrase separate the wheat from the chaff is a biblical expression that means a judge will choose the good people and discard the bad people. The next result was a bit more religious, but the same idea. Jesus will separate the ungodly from the godly and consign the rest, the wicked, the faithless, the unbelieving, the unfruitful to a horrible fate. And on they went like that.

And obviously to me, when I hit a passage like this, it's one of those times where the Gospel just makes you want to stop and scratch your head a little. Can we just chalk this up to the John being a bit hyperbolic, a little over the top? Or are the fundamentalists, were they right all along that the good news is actually about the really bad news that's coming our way if we don't get with the program.

My go-to reputable commentaries basically dodged the question as well, other than to point out how surprised they were that Luke nevertheless refers to John's warning of doom as good news. Right. That's basically my point, judging people, dividing them, retribution for wrongdoers, condemning transgressors to horrible fates. That doesn't sound like good news to me. In fact, it kind of sounds like old news, doesn't it? I mean, aren't we already experts on that sort of thing? Isn't that really kind of how we've been running the world since the beginning? Wasn't the Gospel about showing us a new way of being, rather than doubling down on the old one?

So not ready to give up on my loving, liberating, and life-giving God, quite yet, I did some serious research this week on the farming techniques of the ancient world, because you know, what else are you going to do when you're having a theological crisis, right? Maybe there's more to this grain and chaff metaphor than it might seem. So here's what I learned. It turns out that in order to get the grain, the wheat grain, which is the edible part of the wheat, there was this technique called threshing, that involved, essentially, beating the wheat on the floor repeatedly to loosen the grain from the chaff. The chaff is the husk of the seed. It's a dry kind of scaly casing that surrounds the grain. It's tough. It has no nutritional value. It's not edible. It's not even digestible. Ever have corn on the cob? You've got to peel that off, the husk. Same thing.

So once you were finished threshing, you were left with this big pile of grain mixed with chaff and bits of straw. And so there was this process called winnowing, which was taking a big pitchfork and scooping it all and hurling it into the air and then letting the wind blow the chaff and the straw away, because it was light, and the heavier grain would fall to the floor. And you had to do that about a hundred times, and eventually you separated the grain from the chaff.

With me so far? TMI, right? I get it. Here's the interesting part. It turns out that the chaff is biologically part of the grain. In fact, it's not even called chaff until it's time to harvest. Prior to that, it's just the seed's outer layer, a coating that forms around the grain during its tender maturing stage of life. And it protects it from harsh elements, from harmful insects, and disease.

In other words, the chaff is an essential part of the grain. The grain needs the chaff in order to mature and grow. That starts to change things a bit, doesn't it? But there's more. Because once the grain has matured and it's time for the harvest, the chaff has to be removed. It has to be removed or the grain will spoil. In other words, if the chaff isn't removed, it will choke the life from the very thing it wants protected.

Now, I was not a big biology geek in school, I assure you on that. But I really kind of got into this and I'm reading about it. I'm watching YouTube videos on the process. Call it horticultural exegesis, if you want, but the more I learned, the more it started to open my mind and blew my fire and brimstone image of Jesus

totally out of the water, because it became quite clear that if the Gospel were about separating people as our fundamentalist friends would insist, then the metaphor would have been about good grain and bad grain, good wheat and bad wheat, but that's not what John says. He's talking about the peeling away of a single part of grain. He's talking about separating, not types of people. He's talking about peeling away part of our very selves.

And what's more, it's a part of ourselves that may have once protected us, or given us a sense of safety or security or identity. But as we grow and mature, we no longer need it and now threatens to hold us back. It's not bad people that Jesus wants to throw away. The chaff, the chaff that he comes to burn is our protective coatings of our lives. All those things that we put our trust in other than God. Our chaff is our ego and our false idols. It's the ladder of success we climb, the false identities that we construct for ourselves, the accomplishments we pursue, the wealth and the possessions we amass. All those earthly things that we latch onto in the hope that they might help us feel safe and secure and self-actualized in a cold and unfair world.

Like Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden, we all ventured into a world and had to cover ourselves with whatever we could find so that we might fashion a sense of security, a sense of identity in a suddenly dangerous world. Even if it was a false one, even as in the Creation story, if it kept us hidden from one another and from God and from ourselves, our chaff is the stories we tell about ourselves to ourselves and make us out to be more than we are. It's the masks we wear in public, the Photoshop images we cultivate on social media. It's our pride, our stubbornness, our insistence of always being right. It's our addictions and our distractions. It's our binging and our indulging. It's our codependencies and our accumulation of things. It's all the programs for happiness that our consumer culture is so good at providing.

All of that stuff – all of it, which to one degree or another promises to make us happy and to fill our inner hunger for love and acceptance and safety, all that stuff. And some of them even seem to work for a while, don't they? Until they don't. But even then it can be hard to let go of our chaff. Old habits die hard. Let's face it. Our outer shells protected us when we didn't know where else to turn. Our ego, our false selves got us out the door sometimes when we were afraid. It got us off the carpet when we'd been knocked down. It gave us a sense of identity and a place in the world, a tribe to belong to and a sense of control when we needed it.

But like the grain, as we grew and matured, as the traumas of life taught us lesson after lesson, and with God's help we reluctantly learned that in the end, all that stuff is an empty husk because none of it can nourish us and none of it is a substitute for God. Jesus comes with his winnowing fork when the events of our life crack open the chaff. And we start to see for ourselves that the control we

thought we had was never real, the approval we sought endlessly never really satisfying. The achievements were never enough. Our attachments to things and the people and the safety and security we thought we had created, all of it fleeting at best.

In our drive for our careers and our success, we realize that it really only caused us to lose sight of what mattered most in life. The peeling away begins the moment when we start to see that the chaff of our lives, that which we once thought was so vital to who we are, is now keeping us from being the person we were made to be. The unquenchable fire, it isn't Hell, it's the Holy Spirit. And she descends upon each one of us and burns away fear that keeps us apart. The false stories about ourselves that we've come to believe. The love we've avoided. The relationships we've starved. The forgiveness we've refused. The needs of others we've ignored. The generosity we feared we couldn't afford.

All that chaff that we held onto to protect our tender selves from the cruelties of the world that now holds us back, that is what Jesus comes to free us from. And that is good news. And it's a good news that never ends. It never stops. The unquenchable fire never goes out because our baptism is never complete. Jesus will be with us always, forever peeling away the next layer of chaff from our lives so that more of God's grain within might be revealed.

As we prepare to renew our own baptismal vows today, I think it's worth asking ourselves, what are the parts? What are the parts of us that still need to be hulled and winnowed? What parts of the outer shell of our old lives are we still carrying around? What's the mask we still wear to shield the world from our true self? What am I still trusting in that isn't God?

Come, O Holy Spirit, come. Bring your unquenchable fire so that we too might be fully revealed to be that which we've been all along, your beloved in whom you are well pleased.

Amen.