

“The Welcome Mat”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
December 12, 2021  
Advent 3C

---

Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Luke 3:7-18

I’m not sure if it was discovered when I interviewed to be the pastor of this church. But you should know that I did not pass my first ordination attempt. Or, my second. Already, I had been on a long journey toward ordination. Not only did I complete 3 years of seminary; I had also become an “Inquirer” for ministry in my Presbytery in Atlanta. At the time, the PC(USA) was not ordaining people who were openly gay or lesbian— unless they wanted to commit to a life of celibacy. I wanted to be a minister, not a nun, but I also began the process because I knew the PC(USA) was on the cusp of big changes, and I wanted to be part of it. I was a few years early, as it turned out; my Committee on Preparation for Ministry told me that I could continue as an Inquirer, but because of the church’s policy, they could not bump me up to becoming a Candidate for ministry.

So, I pulled away from the church for a while. I completely stopped. But church kept calling me back in. I worshipped in a few other places that were known to be more welcoming to LGBTQ people, including the United Church of Christ, which has very similar historical and theological roots to the Presbyterian Church, but with a more open polity. It seemed I had found a new home. I began the ordination process again, starting from the beginning. When I finally got to the point where I had to present my Ordination Paper— a 20 page piece that engaged my views on ministry, theology, and faith— I handed to them what I thought would be a perfect paper. I had quoted the right theologians; I gave well-thought out arguments; I engaged scripture.

But my in-care committee didn’t think the paper was as wonderful as I thought it was. “Technically, it’s a good paper,” they told me. “But you are so good at presenting other people’s voices, that we don’t hear anything of your own voice; we don’t see how the Holy Spirit is at work in *your* life.” I was devastated. After pouring my soul into a church that I knew was going to tell me no, anyway, here was the church that was supposed to be the “yes” church, and they were telling me no, too.

But something my committee said in my interview stuck with me. They had said, “Leah, it feels like you’re standing on the welcome mat. But you’re not willing to wipe your feet and walk on in. If you can’t do that for yourself, how are you going to offer that space for others in your ministry?”

I realized I had spent so many years trying to fit into the boxes that others had set, but weren’t mine, that I didn’t really know how to lay my whole self before God. So, I spent another year

with wrestling, tears, and then, finally, joy. The paper I ended up submitting– the second one– didn't feel like I was checking the right boxes. In a way, the process of writing it felt like an experience of being born anew, as Jesus told Zacchaeus he needed to be, because I got to see my authentic self but in a way where I could also see– even in my rawness, failures, fears, and challenges– that the Holy Spirit was intimately at work in my life. I now know I am a better pastor because of the demanding guidance of my ordination committee.

At first, the words of John the Baptist feel very intimidating. Who is this man from the wilderness calling us a **brood of vipers**, telling us that **every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire**? At first glance, his words offer the gentle mercy of a tornado ripping through Kentucky, flattening factories and firehouses, crumbling cars, a devastation that was death-dealing. Is *this* what the prophets meant by saying every mountain will be made low? If so, I'm not sure we want to be part of that.

And yet, as part of this Advent preparation time, we hear the words of the prophet Zephaniah:  
God will rejoice over you with gladness.  
God will renew you in love.  
God will exult over you with loud singing.  
God will remove disaster from you.

So, how do we get from being a brood of vipers, to God rejoicing over us in gladness?

Well, why don't we wipe our feet on the welcome mat of our gospel reading and look more closely at what John the Baptist tells us.

John's message is simple in its meaning, though perhaps harder in its execution. If you have two coats, give one to someone who has none. Soldiers shouldn't use their power to cheat people out of their money or make false charges. Tax collectors should only take what is due; they shouldn't take extra for themselves. Anyone who has food must share it with the hungry.

An interesting note about these directions from John is that anyone can put them into practice. These are not so much about beliefs, as they are about how you live your life. So whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, a soldier or a tax collector, a citizen or or slave, you can take part in what God is bringing forth, beginning by practicing economic justice in your work and in your sharing. This opening of ourselves to generosity can be a first step in opening ourselves to receiving God.

But John's instruction does not stop there. He says of the Messiah's coming that "his winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

This perhaps sounds like the most intimidating verse of our scriptures today. If we were to look around the room, could we tell who was the wheat, and who was the chaff? How can we know which one we are?

If you know anything about grain farming, you'd know that John meant that we are *both* wheat, and chaff. Each grain of wheat is covered in a hard husk— the same is true of rice, barley, or oats. The chaff can be loosened by threshing— that's what happens in a mill. Once the chaff is loosened from the grain, the next step is winnowing— that is, tossing the grain into the wind, which carries the lighter weight chaff away. Humans can't digest chaff but livestock can, so the leftover chaff is either fed to animals or simply burned.

The Russian author and philosopher [Alexandr Solzhenitsyn](#) wrote, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts." In other words, we *each* are both grain, and chaff.

Recognizing that Advent is a season of preparation, I invite you to imagine yourselves standing on the welcome mat, on your way to meeting the Christ. What would it mean to wipe your feet and come in? Is there anything this season you need to shed, to rid yourself of, to be more authentic, honest and true before God? What would you like to toss to the wind? Is there anything shaking you right now, at this point in your life, that feels disruptive but might in fact be helping you to loosen something you do not need spiritually or otherwise?

This whole process of threshing and winnowing may be more work than we thought we needed to do— or at least, it may be a different *kind* of work than we anticipated. Maybe we thought to prepare for Christmas we needed to scour the internet and dash into stores to find the best gifts to bring, when really the gifts Christ asks of us are offered *from the heart and soul of who we are*.

The truth is, Jesus will actually let us in the door, whether we are pure grain or we are grain still wrapped in a cloak of chaff. But as we get more and more comfortable in the presence of Jesus, we may notice that we are no longer guests in *his* home, but instead Christ has made a home in us. Now *that* is, as John proclaimed, good news.