

This is the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the season of the church year in which we remember the revelation, the unveiling of who Jesus was. This takes place through the early events of Jesus' life like *the visit of the Magi*, which revealed Jesus as a king, the story of *12 year old Jesus* astonishing the teachers and scribes at the temple, or *the miracle at the wedding at Cana*, where Jesus revealed His prophetic gift of working wonders. These are all *epiphanies*, moments where it becomes clear exactly who this person is.

One of the key events that Epiphany celebrates is the one in our text, *the baptism of Jesus*, where the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove, and where God the Father speaks from heaven to affirm the ministry of the Son. After this, as we read in John's gospel, John the Baptist publicly identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Christ, the Holy Spirit Baptizer. His identity is revealed through the epiphany of His baptism.

Before this Epiphany, though, there was confusion over the Christ. The people were wondering in their hearts “Is *John* the Christ?” Which was a good mistake to make: because John the Baptist ministered in the desert, calling people out of the city to pass through the waters to salvation, people's expectations ran high that this man might be the new deliverer, the new Moses who would deliver them from their captivity.

But John denies that he is the Christ, and tells the people to look to baptism. Baptism will mark the difference. John's baptism is a watery baptism of repentance in preparation for the Christ; when the Christ comes, He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, a baptism of judgment. The Christ will come as the Reaper, John says, separating the wheat from the chaff (Remember Psalm 1? The wicked are like chaff). His winnowing fork is in His hand, and as He encounters people, He will toss them into the air, and the chaff will be blown into the burn pile, while the wheat is stored in the barn. Jesus will test you to determine whether you have value to God, or whether you are destined for the fire. “I'm calling you to repent of your sins,” John is saying, “but the Christ will call you to account for your sins.”

John describes the work of Christ as *clearing the threshing floor*, which is an obvious metaphor of judgment, but it's a metaphor with a *history*. God and threshing floors go way back: Jacob's funeral is held at a threshing floor, the main action of the book of Ruth happens at a threshing floor, but the most important threshing floor in the Bible is the one that King David buys from Araunah the Jebusite.

2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 24 tells the story of David's pride getting the better of him when he puts his trust in his army, instead of in God. God judges him by sending the Angel of the Lord to administer a plague that sweeps through Israel, reaping God's people until just outside Jerusalem. God has compassion on Jerusalem, and stops the Angel at this threshing floor just outside the city.

Judgment stops at the threshing floor, and King David rushes to the spot, buys the threshing floor, and turns it into an altar. Judgment stops, worship starts. And in fact, this is the site where Solomon builds the temple, so that Israel worships at the threshing floor where God's mercy brought an end to judgment.

So here's something that you should see: backing up just a few verses in Luke, the people who come to John for baptism ask him what they should do, and he tells them “Stop stealing, and share with the needy.” The urgency of John's message comes in the fact that judgment is coming: the axe is laid at the root of the tree; the reaper's winnowing fork is in his hand.”

When the Reaper comes to the threshing floor, to the temple, what does He see? He sees greedy priests stealing widow's houses, and corrupt merchants turning the temple into a den of thieves. And so what does He do? *He clears His threshing floor.* He's angry, because the temple is supposed to be the place where judgment stops and worship starts, but instead, they've turned a house of prayer into a den of thieves. And sadly, just like they didn't listen to John the Baptist, they don't listen to Jesus, and the Angel of the Lord returns in 70AD destroys the temple. Jesus clears the threshing floor.

Now, I don't think that John the Baptist is directly prophesying this event; he's talking about the whole nature of Jesus' ministry. But when Jesus cleanses the temple, John would be saying, “That's exactly what I was talking about.”

And seeing this event as typical of the reaping that Jesus came to do helps to explain verse 18. It's a little bit jarring to read John say “The Reaper is coming with unquenchable fire!” And then the next verse says, “And he preached more good news like this.” How is judgment and fire good news?

It's good news if you hate sin. It's good news if you are tired of watching the leaders of God's people gobble up widow's houses, if it hurts your heart when prosperity preachers buy private jets with money donated by deceiving vulnerable women. It's good news if you are tired of tax collectors skinning you alive, or if you are tired of soldiers and law enforcement abusing their authority. It's good news if you are ruled over by a wicked man like Herod who has no idea what true marriage is, and adds perversion of marriage to his long list of sins, and threatens to throw people in jail for refusing to go along with his wickedness! A Reaper bringing judgment is good news if your heart's desire is to see sin stopped and replaced by true worship. If those things matter to you, then you are longing for a Reaper, and the arrival of a Reaper would be good news.

If only God would send a Reaper, if only there were someone holy enough not to need judgment Himself, if only God would be pleased to anoint someone to bring about justice!

Now when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus' baptism is the commissioning of the Reaper. Baptism is not just cleansing, it is also consecration for service. Jesus is being washed in preparation for His work of judgment. And at this epiphany of Jesus, we also receive an epiphany of the Trinity. Jesus is in prayer, the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and the Father speaks a benediction over His Son.

And once again we need to look through our Old Testament glasses. What should come to mind when the Spirit descends as a dove? If you remember the story of Noah, you recall that he too, passed through the waters of judgment, and the dove was the sign that it was time to enter the new world, to be fruitful and multiply, and have dominion over the earth. Jesus has survived the water, and now He will go forth to exercise dominion, as well.

The surrounding context in Luke's gospel gives his account of Jesus' baptism a very different feel than what you might be accustomed to. When the Father speaks from heaven concerning His Son, He speaks with genuine love, but this is not a sentimental moment, like a new Dad looking at his baby. This is a Father watching His Son receive a sword and a commission. The Father loves the Son *because* He is the one who will fill the barn with wheat and burn the chaff. The Son that the Father is looking on with love is the Reaper.

In this Epiphany account, Jesus has been revealed to you as both Reaper and beloved Son, and these two identities are not in conflict with one another. And so as we seek to apply this text to our lives, I want us to make application from both aspects of who Jesus is.

The first lesson, at the risk of sounding cliché, is simply this: **fear the Reaper**. Realize that Jesus is coming to bring judgment and justice to the world, and just because you are a child of Abraham, just because you grew up in church or because you are baptized does not mean that you are ready for His coming. John calls *God's people* to repent and be baptized.

Think of your baptism as both a cleansing and a commissioning. Your sins have been washed away *so that* you can live a life of holiness, a life of bearing fruit so that the Reaper's axe will not be laid at the root of your tree. The fruit that John preaches about is this: share with the needy, and don't steal. Don't abuse your authority – be content with your wages. This means that if there are brothers and sisters around you who are hungry and naked, then you are not ready for Jesus to come! If you mistreat your employees, or your family, or use your position in life for selfish gain, you are not ready for Jesus to come! If you grumble and complain about your wages, you are not ready for Jesus to come. Share. Don't steal. Be content.

The second lesson is this: **be pleased in the Son**, and in particular, in the Son's work of reaping. Rejoice that the harvest will both fill the barn and clear the threshing floor. For those who repent and believe, being harvested as wheat for God's barn is good news. But it is also good news that those who reject God will be burned with unquenchable fire. Chaff being burned is good news, because it means that judgment can stop, and worship can start. God is pleased when the chaff is thrown into the fire, and you should be pleased, as well.

Related to this, though, is the task we share with John the Baptist. We too, are called to be witnesses for Jesus Christ, and so our task is to reveal Jesus to others, both as the Reaper and as the Beloved Son. It is easy to present Jesus as the Lamb of God who offers the world an incredible service – He takes away the sin of the world. But it is more difficult to warn people that their lives will be judged by Jesus, that He comes with the Spirit and with fire. Churches are often filled with people who rely on the fact that they are planted in God's field, instead of considering whether or not they are bearing fruit. Jesus, however, is looking for fruit.

This means that as we bear witness for Jesus, we need to rebuke sin. We need to publicly confront sin wherever it is; in our own hearts, or in the decisions of the king. This is a major part of why I consider it to be worthwhile to participate in the March for Life each January 22<sup>nd</sup>. I am there to bear witness that a country that protects the slaughter of unborn babies by law is not ready for Jesus to come. My presence is meant as a warning to our leaders, that brood of vipers in Washington, DC. I want them to fear the Reaper, and to repent.

When you think about Jesus, when you share Jesus with others, don't settle for a sentimental picture of who Jesus is: a lamb, a boy whose daddy is patting him on the head. Jesus is a mighty harvestman, come to bring unquenchable fire on the earth. This is the Jesus that John reveals. Are you well-pleased in Him?

But hear the good news: Because you have repented of your sins, because you have been washed in Jesus' baptism, and because you have been made one with Jesus, God is pleased in you. This means that you no longer need to fear the Reaper by being terrified that He will throw you into the fire because of your sins. You are God's wheat, and Jesus will not lose you. He will gather you into the barn.

So do not fear the Reaper in that sense. Instead, stand in awe of His work. Love Jesus, be pleased in Jesus *because of* His work of judging the world. This is not something to be embarrassed by, something to apologize for. Jesus' winnowing fork is good news. Be pleased, along with God the Father, that His beloved Son the Reaper has come to cleanse the world with the Spirit and with fire.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*