

“DID JOHN ‘GET’ JESUS? DO WE ‘GET’ JOHN?”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2016

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Was John right about Jesus?

I don't think so. At least, not completely.

He did understand their relationship. He knew that he himself was not “The One.” He knew he was not the savior of his people. He knew that would be someone else. But when he described Jesus, he missed by a mile.

He was correct to say “one more powerful than I is coming after me . . . I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” Nobody could be. And he was partly right when he said Jesus would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (If he meant Pentecost, he nailed it.) But I think this is where John begins to go off the rails. Yes, you could say that Jesus would “baptize” with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” But I don't think John had a Pentecost in mind. He thought Jesus would come with a winnowing fork to execute final judgment upon people, gathering “the wheat” into his granary and burning “the chaff” with unquenchable fire—not a good fire.

If John the Baptist was right about Jesus, if Jesus came to root out the bad people and burn them up, then a lot of other people are wrong about Jesus, including me and you and Martin Luther. And if we are wrong about Jesus, we are wrong about God. That is what it means to be Trinitarian in our faith. The God we believe in is the god we see in the face of Jesus.

You and I do not identify Jesus with “the wrath that is to come.” The Jesus we know and love and have faith in could be nicknamed “Sweetness,” like Walter Payton. When we celebrate in Advent, we do not think about Jesus wielding an axe with which he is going to cut people down so he can throw them into

the fire. Someone famous once said: “For in him every one of God's promises is a ‘Yes.’” (2 Cor 1:20)

So, was John right to label the advent of the Lord Jesus as the “coming of wrath”?

In a word: no. Thank goodness, he was wrong.

So why is John not a villain? Why is he so important a part of the story of Jesus?

Because John prepared people for the sweetness of the gospel, by challenging their smug self-certainty. Once they knew the truth about themselves, they were ready to receive the other truth, the truth of Jesus, whose sole purpose was to forgive, heal, and save.

Some signature statements of Jesus:

Those who are well don't need a doctor, but those who are sick. I did not come to gather the righteous, but the unrighteous.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

The son of Man has authority on earth . . . to forgive sins.

Not much wrath there.

Of course, in the back of the mind, where they belong, are some other phrases which came from Jesus' mouth: “The subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And he told of a man who built his house on the sand, and “the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” Those are not encouraging words.

But does that mean John was right about scary Jesus? Maybe Jesus merely shifted the focus of judgment off one group of people onto another group of people? Maybe Jesus just preferred actually kind people, for example, to people who were rules-followers? So he diverted the wrath away from poor people and notorious sinners because they were actually nice people in their hearts, whereas the Pharisees and scribes were sort of legalistic and self-centered??

I don't think so. That is one way of solving this problem. The rest of the gospel of Matthew would not support that, however. Jesus is not mad about people because they obey rules. He is sad that people do not love the truth about God. And he is only telling an unpleasant truth when he says that when we fake our love of God while making a display of being good people, we go through a wide gate onto a broad road which leads to destruction. The destruction of others and ourselves.

In his sadness over the lostness of humankind, Jesus does indeed, from time to time, pronounce a doomy conclusion over people. But his purpose, the end to which he devotes himself entirely, is to bring the consolation of God to people so that we love the God who can not only heal us as persons but heal the world. And the sad fact is, that if we disown Jesus, that is, if we dissociate ourselves from the mercy of God, then the mercy of God is dissociated from us. This is as firm a judgment as Jesus declares, and it is indirect: "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."

Sweetness is on offer in Jesus, not wrath. But to refuse the sweetness of God's mercy is to revert to life which is on every side shaped by judgment, wrath, and destruction. Don't take my word for it; look into your own heart, and read the newspapers and social media. "Moth and rust do corrupt, thieves

break in and steal." Corruption, deceit, hypocrisy? It's a small world after all--and old and frail.

But here comes Jesus. Not as "the wrath that is to come," but as one who brings a surprise. Not excuses for everyone, but forgiveness for all who repent. Jesus will declare what he was all about in chapter 28 of Matthew, and, yes, he does make a large claim. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." But for what? To baptize—as John said—in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, not with a fire which will destroy what has been cut down, but with a water which brings us into God's kingdom and joins us, yes us, in fellowship with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

If John the Baptist's vision had come true, we would have seen a bonfire in chapter 28 into which all evildoers would be cast to the accompaniment of gnashing teeth. John expected Jesus to clean house. What he did not expect was that Jesus would build house. Jesus would build a new house, a fellowship in God of people whose lives radiate to others the glory of God, which is not to destroy but to forgive, to redeem, to give life again.

So John was wrong, thanks be to God. But Jesus would say we need to pass through Advent 2 to get to Christmas. So thanks, John, for alerting us to the "threatening danger of our sins," so we might welcome the antidote, the Babe of Bethlehem who would suffer and die for our dangerous sins.

Amen.