

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Release of Advent

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a voice crying out from the wilderness, and it does not sound like a lullaby. John the Baptist appears in rough camel hair and a leather belt, with dust in the creases of his face and a fire in his words. He names the hypocrisy he sees. He calls religious leaders a “brood of vipers.” He names complacency and spiritual sleep for what it is. And then, like a hammer striking a bell, he announces One who is coming with a winnowing fork in hand.

For many of us, those words have landed like a threat. We’ve been taught to imagine God standing over humanity with a cosmic pitchfork, dividing “good” people and “bad” people, storing the wheat and burning the chaff. The implication is chilling: Some belong. Others are disposable.

That reading has done damage. It has wounded souls and narrowed the wideness of God’s mercy. It has especially harmed those on the margins—queer and trans siblings, people whose cultures were colonized, those who were told they must remake themselves to be acceptable. “You are chaff,” they were told. “Change or burn.”

But what if John is not talking about destroying people at all? What if John is announcing the release of burdens? What if the Winnower comes not to sort people into saved and unsavable, but to free each of us from what keeps love from feeding the world?

This is Advent. We are waiting for God-With-Us. We are preparing room, not just in our sanctuaries and schedules, but in our souls. What if the winnowing fork is not a threat to fear, but a promise: that the Spirit will remove what we no longer need, so that what is life-giving in us can nourish our neighbors?

Let's pause and look at wheat. A single grain of wheat is made of the kernel and the chaff. They are not two different plants, and they are not two different groups of people. The chaff is a protective shell. Early on, it matters. It shields the seed from weather and harm. But when the time comes to make bread, it has to give way so the kernel can do what it was made to do: feed the community.

Spiritually, many of our so-called "chaff" layers have protected us. They were coping strategies that helped us survive. A sharp tongue that kept danger at a distance. A perfectionism that made us feel safe. A refusal to be vulnerable because vulnerability got us hurt. An identity we adopted to be acceptable in a harsh world. None of this is "evil." It was protection.

But the Kingdom of God is a kinship of love. It invites us to a table where the food is shared and the cups are passed, where fear loosens its grip and trust grows, where we bear one another's burdens. Hard shells make connection difficult. They keep love from getting in and joy from getting out. They can turn into walls that starve the community we are called to feed.

So hear good news: Advent is not a season where God judges you for being bad. Advent is a season where the Spirit, whose very name means wind and breath, gently blows away the husk you do not need anymore. The Winnower frees the kernel. The Wind of God carries off the suits of armor we have outgrown. And as the chaff lifts and sifts away, the wheat of your true, God-made self emerges to become bread for the world. Release is not punishment. It is grace.

If this is true, here is a loving caution: Ask the Spirit to winnow your own heart, but never try to thresh your neighbor. There is a long and sorrowful history of people taking spiritual metaphors and turning them into tools of violence. When we decide who is "chaff," we are always wrong. And when we attempt to strip away another's layers by force, we commit harm.

We have seen this enacted in history's cruelties, including the forced assimilation of Indigenous children in boarding schools. The mindset claimed to "save" by erasing, to purify by destroying culture, language, and identity. It was a blasphemy against the *imago dei*, a violent misuse of religious imagery to justify oppression. That is not God's winnowing. That is human domination.

We see echoes of this in political rhetoric that imagines we can bomb “evil” out of existence, or legislate compassion by shaming, or cleanse communities by scapegoating. It is easier to declare war on people than to take up the slow work of healing the conditions that generate harm. It is easier to call someone else “chaff” than to face the husks around our own hearts.

But the repentance John announces is not coercion. It is consent. It is a turning that happens in the presence of love, truth, and safety. Accountability is real. Justice matters. But transformation is not achieved by force. It is cultivated in communities where people are seen, where pain can be named, where repair is pursued, and where the Spirit does the sifting that none of us can do for another.

So let us be a people who refuse to wield the winnowing fork against our neighbor. Let us be people who set down our impulse to fix, to control, to purify other people’s lives. Instead, let us become a field where the wind can move freely and each person can breathe.

Isaiah gives us a stark image: a felled tree, reduced to a stump. Sometimes release feels like loss. We ask the Spirit to take what we do not need, and it feels like something is being cut away. Old structures fall. Old certainties crumble. Patterns that once made us feel secure are no longer possible.

But Isaiah refuses despair. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” The God who allows endings is also the God of hidden beginnings. In Detroit, where vacant lots looked like defeat, neighbors imagined gardens and grew abundance. What looked like absence became space for life. So it is with our souls. When God removes what is overgrown or harmful, it is to make room for what can flourish.

Advent faith trusts the stump. It believes that below the surface, roots hold, and sap stirs, and something tender will push up in due time. Cutting down comes before the new shoots. Pruning precedes fruit.

Then Matthew invites us to another image: the river. John is not on a dais. He stands in the water. People come confessing, and rather than remain on the bank as critics or saviors, they step in. That is what immersion means. We stop watching from a distance. We stop diagnosing and fixing from dry land. We get into the muddy, life-filled, memory-laden waters where God meets us.

The river is an elder. It remembers exodus and exile, tears and songs, baptisms and burials. It remembers our ancestors' courage and our people's pain. To be washed in it is to be claimed by a story bigger than our own. It is to say: I will not hide on the bank. I will join you in the struggle and the hope. I will let the current carry away what I do not need. I will receive what the Spirit gives.

The stump says: trust the hidden life. The river says: enter the shared life. Together they teach us how to wait for Christ—rooted and immersed, grounded and connected, pruned and flowing.

So what is the winnowing fork? It is a tool of grace, wielded by One whose hands are tender with love. It does not discard people. It separates fear from courage. It loosens shame from dignity. It lifts defensiveness from tenderness. It clears away what we do not need so that we can become bread.

Here is the Advent question for each of us: What chaff is the Holy Spirit inviting you to release?

- Is it the perfectionism that keeps you from starting?
- The sarcasm that protects you from intimacy?
- The self-criticism that drowns out God's delight in you?
- The need to be right that keeps you from being kind?
- The savior complex that longs to fix others rather than love them?
- The secret resentment that has hardened into a husk around your heart?

You do not have to pry it off yourself. Stand where the Wind is moving. Step into the river. Sit at the stump and watch for the green. Pray simply: "Spirit of Jesus, I release what I do not need. Carry away my fear. Free my tenderness. Make me bread for my neighbors."

Do not fear the wind. Let it carry away what is dead so that what is alive can flourish. Do not despise the stump. Watch for the shoot. Do not cling to the bank. Enter the water. The One who comes after John is near, and his baptism is fire that warms, not wounds. It is Spirit that breathes, not breaks. It is love that purifies, not punishes.

Christ is coming. And even now, the sifted grain of your life is being made ready for the table. Amen.