

Wheat and chaff: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

by [Ruth A. Meyers](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

John the Baptist's fiery call to repentance sounds harsh when we're in the midst of preparations for the baby Jesus. The birth of a child is usually preceded by joyful expectation. But the child envisioned by John will come with an axe, with a winnowing fork and with purging flame.

Although John is most severe when he is warning the Pharisees and Sadducees, he calls all to repent, and when they are baptized in the Jordan, to confess their sins. No one, it seems, is righteous. All need to repent and be cleansed from sin. And then they must live a changed life. It is not enough to claim membership among God's chosen people; our deeds must be in accord with our stated commitments.

While John the Baptist emphasizes harsh judgment, Isaiah offers a different picture. A branch will grow from the root of Jesse, he says, a new king greater even than the beloved king David. With the spirit of the Lord resting upon him, this king will reign with righteousness and justice. A new day of harmony will dawn, a time when born enemies, predator and prey, will live together in peace.

The two prophecies sit side by side, but sound discordant when heard together. "The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid." "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Yet these are two sides of the same judgment. Isaiah promises not only that the king will judge with righteousness, but also that he will kill the wicked. John the Baptist not only threatens that the chaff will be burned in an unquenchable fire, but also promises that the wheat will be gathered into the granary. Both outcomes are held before us in each text.

It is easy for us to know which outcome we desire. Who doesn't want to be gathered into the reign of God? Who would prefer to burn in an unquenchable fire? But we need only remember that John singled out the religious leaders for his harshest criticism to know that we dare not rest easy in our affiliation with the body of Christ.

Yet our Christian hope is in our participation in the body of Christ. We are baptized not only with water but also with the Holy Spirit. We are born anew, incorporated

into Christ.

Isaiah's prophecy lists gifts of the Spirit that will be bestowed on the king who descends from Jesse: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, the fear of the Lord. As early as the fourth century, these gifts were enumerated in a prayer for the Spirit that was part of Christian rites of baptism (and later of confirmation). Given the Christian interpretation that Jesus is this descendant of Jesse, how audacious it is for us to claim the same gifts for ourselves!

Yet this is our claim: that we become members of Christ, putting on Christ, participating in Christ's royal priesthood. Christian mystics over the centuries have described their experience of the unitive state, where the Christian soul becomes one with God. Most of us get only a glimpse of this full union with God. In our mundane existence, we know God only partially, and the gifts of the Spirit appear to be more promise than fulfillment.

The path to the unitive state, the mystics tell us, includes purgation, an encounter with the transforming love of God that cleanses and purifies us. We are both wheat and chaff, and the chaff must be burned away. The axe must cut out whatever in us does not bear good fruit. The same Spirit that empowers us also cleanses us with a purifying fire.

Even though I know the truth of purgation in my own life as a Christian, I hesitate to write of it. The scriptural command to die to self has been used for centuries to reinforce social systems that limit the ability of women, people of color, poor people and other oppressed people to claim their full human dignity. Those in less privileged positions, whether because of race or class or sex or some other characteristic, are told that their suffering is required by the gospel and are urged to accept that suffering passively and graciously.

The besetting sins of oppressed people may include self-denial, passivity and complicity in their own oppression. When purgation reinforces our sinful tendencies toward self-destruction, it is not life-giving, not of God. Purgation may mean claiming one's voice and burning away complicity in oppression, rather than passively accepting suffering.

Isaiah prophesies a king anointed by the Spirit who will bring righteousness and establish a peaceable realm where predator and prey, oppressed and oppressor, live together harmoniously. Both oppressor and oppressed are transformed—the chaff

burned away, branches not bearing fruit cut away. Once they are made new by the purging fire, predator and prey become companions eating together in peace.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul envisions a similar harmony. Through Christ, Paul tells us, Jew and gentile alike are offered salvation. Just as Christ has welcomed them, they must let go of the barriers dividing them and welcome one another.

In Advent, as we prepare again to welcome the infant Christ, we are reminded of purgation, our need to repent and be cleansed. We are also reminded that we are empowered by the Spirit, who bestows gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord.