

Refiner's fire: Sunday, December 17

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

by [John C. Morris](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

What is the most popular Christmas song? One way to determine that is to consult the Muzak Holiday Channel and find the song that has the most versions available. If that's a fair way to deal with this question, then the answer would be "The Christmas Song," most often sung by either Nat King Cole or Bing Crosby. Second prize goes to "White Christmas" (Bing Crosby again). Then come "Winter Wonderland" and "Silver Bells."

All of these songs contain the requisite amount of "warm fuzzies." Now, imagine you are sitting in front of a crackling fire with Nat King Cole's mellow voice in the background. Suddenly the door bursts open, a gust of wind blows snow into the room, and a man with a bushy beard and camel-skin tunic strides in. There is fire in his eyes.

As he chews on a handful of locusts, he says, "How nice that you're feeling cozy and happy. Your holly and mistletoe look lovely over the fireplace. But what have you done lately for justice and peace among all people? And what effort have you made recently to respect the dignity of every human being?" It's the Baptizer. A real killjoy. You want warm fuzzies and he gives you caustic questions. You want a merry Christmas and a happy New Year, but he doesn't much care how you feel or what you think. He just wants to know what you've done for the kingdom recently. The questions he poses are the last two questions of the baptismal covenant in the Book of Common Prayer. Those are hot-potato questions, much harder to handle than the roasting chestnuts.

When we ask what we should do, he offers some good examples. If some people have too much and other people have too little, guess who should share? This is not a new message; in the Book of Exodus, the story of God's gift of manna was all about the same thing. Nobody should have too much and nobody should have too little. Everyone should have enough. That godly prescription is strong medicine. It

subverts the notion that we should strive to accumulate all that we can. It challenges the idea that we should invest our time and talent and treasure into making ourselves happy and comfortable. Instead, the Baptizer says, we should strive for justice and peace among all people and put our money into kingdom investments.

There's nothing on the Muzak Holiday Channel that will be good accompaniment for that message. When some powerful people (tax collectors and soldiers of the occupation army) question the Baptizer, he challenges them to be fair and nonviolent. In other words, they should respect the dignity of every human being. Listeners who have experienced harassment or have been cheated are suddenly the ones feeling some warmth. This messenger is on their side. They find their expectations rising. Maybe there is hope for a better world.

That is the message that sears itself into our consciousness. This intruder is here not to spoil our holiday, but to point us in the direction of real hope and real joy. His words are the refiner's fire that burns away impurities.

Mystics throughout the ages have understood how the holy fire burns away the superficial images and idols we erect. One of the most famous expressions of this reality comes from French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. He wrote, "In the year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November . . . from about half-past ten in the evening till about half an hour after midnight: FIRE. . . . God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Emotion. Joy . . . Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy . . . My God . . . let me not be separated from thee for ever." Pascal carried this description of his experience with him for the rest of his life. It was written under a drawing of a blazing cross. The Baptizer points in the same direction, to the One who will baptize with fire and ask us to take up our crosses. The fire that blazes forth in this story is not from a cozy fireplace. It is from the word of God.

As Pascal realized, underneath the holy fire is holy joy. If the Baptizer can be described as a killjoy, it is because the joy that he kills is the false joy of manufactured sentimentality and superficial jolliness. Underneath John's stern message is the good news that a better world is possible by the grace and power of God. Zephaniah said it thousands of years ago. Paul wrote it in the first century. Now we can hear it too, if we will only turn off those other songs for a while.

John's baptismal water may put out some of the fires we have kindled ourselves. It may rain on some of our parades. But choices have to be made. Wheat and chaff must be separated so we can get to the good stuff.

As the child who had never before been to a Christmas service said when asked what it was like, "I want some of that 'umphant.'" "What's that?" the child was asked. "You know, it's what those people were singing about—'O Come all ye faithful, joyful and try umphant' I'd like to try some of that 'umphant.'"