

The One who takes our chaff away

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God loves everything that God made, and God loves you especially, and the only way you can avoid that love is by deliberately removing yourself from it. That is how I want to preach this Gospel on Advent 3. John the Baptist tells us that we can, in fact, separate ourselves from love, and describes some of the ways how.

In response to John's insistence that the ax is at the root of the tree, poised to cut down trees that don't bear good fruit, three groups ask, "If that's so, how then shall we live?" The instructions John gives them are not especially onerous. Basically, he says, "Do what you are doing, but try to do it more decently and less exploitatively." If you do persist in exploitation—in hoarding coats and food in the face of the naked and the hungry, in bilking those who owe you money, in threatening and extorting—then you'll become separated from your neighbor, from God, from your truest and best self.

After John the Baptist spells out these instructions for living, he predicts that One is coming with a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff. This is a suggestive image. Once it's gone from the wheat, chaff blows away and vanishes into the air. To describe those things that separate us from God as chaff, then, is to say that the things that separate us aren't really much of anything. They don't have substance; they are privation and absence. But they obstruct nonetheless.

And it's telling that John the Baptist uses plant imagery. I don't have any direct experience with wheat and chaff, but I do know about pruning roses. You prune a

rose bush to get more flowers. We maximize the flowers because the abundance of roses pleases us, but the extra roses might not particularly please the plant. Maybe if the rose bush could, it would stop us from going at it with shears. Maybe it would tell us that it didn't especially care about producing more flowers, and it would prefer not to be trimmed.

Plants send out distress signals when cut. The smell of freshly cut grass is produced by chemicals called "green leaf volatiles," which are a response to the grass blade's having been mowed. The chemicals help the wound close and prompt defensive compounds to grow preemptively in spots that haven't yet been trimmed. Grass, in other words, resists what seems to the grass to be damage. To us, of course, mowing the lawn seems to make the grass healthier: thicker, smoother, greener. But the grass resists the mowing because the grass senses that something is being taken from it.

Just as the rose bush might not really care about producing an extra 30 roses, we might not care about our own flowering. Eventually we will like it. But we don't know that ahead of time, since knowledge of the really real is one thing that will flower later and currently isn't around in great supply.

And just as the grass signals distress when being cut, it's painful to have our chaff removed. It's painful because we like the chaff and don't want it to be taken away. We like being protected from God's gaze, and we hold the chaff to us. Sometimes we hold quite tightly and when the chaff is ripped away, we hurt.

Yet Luke tells us that John the Baptist's predictions are good news. And of course they are. The good news is that One is coming who will make it possible for us to stop hoarding coats and exploiting people. One is coming who will make it possible for us stop separating ourselves from God and neighbor. One is coming who will take our chaff away, so that we might be near God without obstruction or protection or shell.