

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be wholly acceptable to you, our Lord and our redeemer.

When is the Messiah coming?

What should we do to get ready?

In our Gospel reading this morning, John the Baptist speaks to the crowds who have come out to be baptized. "You vipers," he calls them. "You treacherous people! You're just here because you've heard the Messiah is coming, and you know you're not ready to meet him. But you can't fool God. If you aren't bearing good fruit, you're going to be cut down and burned."

Wow! That's bad news! If I were there, I might have run away. But they don't. They stay. Why? Because they know the Messiah is coming. They *want* to get ready to meet him. This is the original Advent story.

So the people stay. They take in John's words. And they ask him the vital question, "What should we do?"

And John has an answer for them. Imagine yourself there, in that crowd. Who would you be? What might John be saying to you?

Do you have two coats? Give one away.

Do you have enough to eat? Share with someone who doesn't.

Are you a tax collector? Well, probably not. But do you work with money? Do you buy or sell goods or services? Collect no more than you should. Be fair and honest.

Are you a soldier? Well, probably not. But are you a police officer? A teacher? A parent? A priest? Are others' lives in your hands? Be fair and honest. Be satisfied with your wages.

Well, this is good news! It fills the people with hope. "We can do this!" they think. "We can be fair and honest. We can be satisfied with what we have and share our extras. We can bear fruit for God!" And they ask John, "Are you the Messiah? We can work with you!"

"No," says John. "I'm just a regular guy. Me, in my camel skins, eating grasshoppers, I'm not your Messiah. You're not supposed to follow me. Someone much better is coming. I've got water. He's got the Holy Spirit! He's got fire!"

GULP! I'm not sure I'm ready for *him*, this guy John describes, with the winnowing fork and the threshing floor, and the unquenchable fire. I don't think I'm ready to be winnowed and threshed!

But, wait. Let's listen some more. Here's John, this guy we like now, saying the Messiah is not someone to fear, but someone who will baptize us and gather us in. When all is said and done, that chaff he's going to burn, that's not us. It may be part of us, but it isn't really us. Yes, we need to be challenged, to question our actions and our purpose in life. But why? Well, because it's never too late to reconsider, to change, to do better. Our Messiah is coming, and it's never too late to get ready to meet him.

But—what should we do? John the Baptist isn't exactly preaching in our neighborhood these days. How can we hear God?

Whenever I read scripture, these two-thousand-year-old stories, I think, "How does this apply to me, today, in my world? That's not too hard to figure out in this passage. Especially in Advent, it can be easy to feel we're on the threshing floor. We might be struggling with anxiety, busy-ness, or loneliness. How can we find the Messiah? We have to pause, take time out, and ask God the crowd's question, "What should we do?"

I feel closest to God when I'm walking my dogs in the woods, saying grace at meals, and here, at church. These are things I'm tempted to give up when I'm busy, sad, or angry. And they are the very things I most need. When do you feel closest to God? Take time for those things. It's amazing what we can hear when we pause to ask, "What should I do right now?" and take time to notice what God tells us.

It usually does take time to notice how God answers. It may be in something we read, a conversation we have, a flash of insight; God has myriad ways of communicating with us. Then we have to share our plans with God in prayer and adjust as we go forward. That's why Advent is a season, not just one day.

This Advent, I felt God nudging me to do less. Less rushing, less shopping, less wrapping! Most of the people on my Christmas list don't need anything material. But some people do. So I'm trying to buy locally made, fairly traded, even second-hand goods. And I'm doing things, like Cristkindlsmarkt, that build community. These are ways I can bear fruit for God right now.

What should we do? The details are as different as we are. But the gist is here: Be fair and honest. Be satisfied and generous. Bear fruit for God in your own unique way. This passage tells me that that God doesn't ask us to do what we can't. God asks us to do what we can. God knows what kinds of fruit we can bear.

Which brings me back to the wheat and the chaff. It's not that some of us are wheat, doing a good job, and others are chaff, doing a lousy job. It's not that simple. We're all wheat. Wheat is a grain, but it grows like grass. What isn't seed, or grain, is chaff. We each have some grain, and some chaff, and we can each bear more fruit for God. We can focus on the grain in our lives, get rid of the chaff, and remember that our Messiah has already come and gathered us in. We have been baptized in His name.

Advent, and our whole life as Christians, is about noticing that God is reaching out to us. We can pause and reflect, as that crowd did for John, ask God, "What should we do?" and listen for the answers. We don't have to go naked, or starve, or leave our jobs and homes to find Jesus. We just have to be still for a while and hear the Good News. Our Messiah has already come.

Amen.