



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

December 7, 2025; Advent 2A [Isaiah 11:1-10](#); [Romans 15:4-13](#); [Matthew 3:1-12](#)

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” On the second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist bursts into the scene like a Baptist preacher. His words sound harsh. Take a moment with me, however, to dig a little deeper into the metaphor he is using. He is talking about the processing of wheat. A head of wheat has a tough exterior that must be cracked open in order to get at the kernel inside. Farmers would do this by spreading the grain on the ground or threshing floor, having an oxen or other animal walk it to break the shells, then using a threshing fork to toss the whole thing into the air. The wind blows away the husks while the heavier kernels of grain drop to the ground. Separating the wheat from the chaff isn’t about separating good people from bad people. It’s about getting rid of our rough exteriors and revealing the good that is inside each of us. In our gospel, John the Baptist talks about a baptism of water washing away sins. John’s baptism with fire does the same thing. John’s baptism with fire isn’t about punishment. It’s about purification. Do you remember the words of the prophet Malachi (3:1-4) in Handel’s *Messiah* “For he is like a refiner’s fire.”? [1] A refiner’s fire melts out impurities and leaves the pure metal behind. These days there is much talk about rare earth metals. Rare earth metals are, well, rare. To get just a trace amount of a rare earth metal, you need to refine a lot of rock. You need to process a huge amount of ore to get just a tiny bit of what you are looking for; but with that tiny bit you can power cell phones and computers and cars, transform the world, and explore the secrets of the universe. God’s refining fire unleashes the same kind of power and potential in you. You may have a tough exterior and a lot of thick skin, but you only need a trace amount of gold inside to do the greatest of things. It only takes the tiniest of seeds to have a new shoot come out of the stump of Jesse, the tiniest bit of hope to make a path in the wilderness, the tiniest bit of love to welcome others – even gentiles, those most different from us – as Christ has welcomed us.

These passages sound judgy but they aren’t judging us. Jesus’s judgement is for the Pharisees and Sadducees, the political and religious leaders who wanted to keep people trapped in their fear and tied to a temple-industrial complex that demanded their loyalty, took their money but didn’t take away their sins or any of the problems they faced. Jesus’ judgement is reserved for those who throw their religion in other people’s faces, not as a source of love, but as something to punish and demean. Jesus’ judgment is for those who claim to follow God’s ways but do nothing of the sort.

“Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you...” Welcoming others as Christ means honoring the kernel of goodness, nugget of gold, and source of light within them, even when those things are very hard to see – and when they may not even be able to see those things themselves. In my office, visitors often share feelings of unworthiness or inadequacy. They tell me that they are not sure of what they believe and have a hard time thinking that God’s love and forgiveness cannot possibly be for them. I tell them that this place is a guilt-free zone; that God loves them just as they are; that God accepts them just as they are; and that God rejoices in them just as they are. From our welcome signs to our mission statement itself, St. Luke’s message is clear: whoever you are, wherever you are from, and wherever you may be in your spiritual journey you are welcome here.

But welcome to what? We are welcoming people to a relationship with God. It is important to say, however, that God welcoming us as we are does not mean that God wants us to stay where we are. God being with us in our struggles does not mean that God wants us to be stuck in them. God holding us up when relationships fail does not mean that God wants our broken hearts not to be healed. God loving little children does not mean that God wants our spirituality or the understanding of our faith to remain on a kindergarten level. Being welcome here means that you are welcome to go on a journey here: a spiritual journey of discovering who you are and whose you are, a journey of relationship and reconciliation and of rough places being made plain. In other words, you are being welcomed on a journey of doing what needs to be done to walk a Christ-like life. In Eastern Orthodox theology this journey is called “theosis,” the process of becoming like or attaining union with God. [2] In Protestant theology, this journey is called “sanctification,” the process of becoming sanctified or holy. [3] As Christians, we believe that a great place for this journey to happen is right here – in the community and communion of the church. Advent is a perfect time for this to start.

All are welcome here. All are welcome here for personal healing and reconciliation and for theosis, sanctification, and other forms of spiritual growth that come from a relationship with Jesus Christ. All are also welcome here to join in the journey, to bear fruits that befit repentance, and to show that the Kingdom of God is near. John the Baptist came at Advent to help prepare the way. Jesus came at Christmas to make that kingdom real. May we, in these seasons of Advent and Christmas, do both.

[1] http://musicacademyonline.com/programs/messiah_06.php

[2] <http://orthodoxwayoflife.blogspot.com/2011/01/why-is-theosis-important.html>

[3] <http://library.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/sanctification>