

## Luke 3:3-18

### Prophetic Threshing and Discerning Expectations

Dec 2021

Advent 3

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<sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the ax 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.”

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

#### **Before Gospel is read:**

“Please listen to the Gospel as if hearing a sermon from John the Baptist.”

#### **Intro:**

Somewhere in Advent we meet the towering figure of John the Baptist who evokes a tough, hairy masculine image with a powerful voice and pointing finger calling God’s people to prepare for God’s imminent breakout in Jewish history.

Did you hear how Luke ended the account of that sermon in v.18?

It seems to end really positively.

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

That sounds like it was a good positive sermon that everyone enjoyed?

But let’s remember the first line, John’s opening words in v.7 to those gathered to hear him.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

**Q1a:** What is going on here?

**Q1b:** How do we get from an opening like this to ‘exhortations and good news’.

**A1a:** So what is going on here?

The answer to that question was anticipated in last week’s message from Chris Morris which I heard on a recording yet to be posted online.

If you heard Chris this was a message he felt God lay on him the day before with the conviction to drop the sermon he had already prepared with sweat and dedication. As I considered Chris’ message I heard two things that connect with what John the Baptist was doing here in today’s reading and from there speak to us here as a congregation.

It has to do with Thresholds, Threshing Floors and reworked 50 year old film recordings of the Beatles!

I sensed God linking all this towards a message for St Matthew’s today.

So what is going on here? In a sermon that begins with finger pointing confrontation but ends described as exhortation and good news?

We remember that this is Luke the historian telling the story. In the preceding verses of chapter 3 heard last week, we were told the exact historic political setting in which John the Baptist appeared in the Judean Desert, that he preached a baptism of repentance linked to the prophecy of Isaiah about the coming of God to bring salvation for all.

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
 make his paths straight.  
<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled,  
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
 and the crooked shall be made straight,  
 and the rough ways made smooth;  
<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Not surprisingly, John’s mission drew interest and people went out to the Judean Desert near the Jordan River to hear the hairy prophet dressed in camel skin. From personal experience, the Judean Desert is not a comfortable place so this was an effort!

John was the first prophet in 400 years so it was significant for people who were seeking God’s salvation for Israel and themselves.

### **Text Part A Threshing**

So comes the day when John faces people from all walks of life who are hungry to hear a message from God. He begins to address his fellow Jewish believers

“**You brood of vipers!** Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> 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.”

This is a prophetic threshing sermon designed to challenge assumptions and change expectations, to wake people up and send them prepared into God’s new future.

John was facing all sorts of Jewish people who were interested and open yet also settled and stuck. They were settled in false expectations about how God viewed them and what the moment required in God’s purposes for Israel. John saw Jewish entitlement and chauvinism along the lines that as descendants of Abraham they were guaranteed God’s grace and mercy.

A modern saying that matches John’s point is: God doesn’t have grandchildren! You can only be a child of God but not a grandchild. So being descended from Abraham does not excuse you from God’s judgement.

Instead John asserts that each will be considered like fruit trees by the fruit each one bears. So there is no group discount or loyalty program when standing before God at his coming judgement. This is all so close that the axe is already in the orchard lying next to the fruit trees. Or - in contemporary NZ terms - the chain saw is sharp and can be heard running in the orchard. Trees bearing bad fruit will be cut down and burned in the fire as we may see happening in the country side as Farmers clear rubbish such as scrub or such.

That is a threshing message.

It is a message to shake people out of their delusions, wake them up and get them focused on a new future.

Don't think you can impress God with a quick river baptism. He is looking for real change, genuine repentance and nothing less.

### Threshing.

Threshing opens up a new future by messing up the old one.

It calls out delusions, lies, hypocrisy and false faith.

It tests existing expectations and generates new ones.

John is our subject today but Jesus was doing this too all the time.

There are two threshing pictures that Chris mentioned last week that open this up.

Both are places of separation.

The first is the **Threshing Floor** where grain was separated from the stalk and husk.

John refers to this later in this sermon where the wheat stalks and husks with grain still inside would be broken down by cutting or crushing under animal hooves into a mixed pile of grain and husk.

Then with something like a good nor-wester blowing a winnowing fork -a bit like a pitch fork- would be used to throw the cut up mix of grain, stalks and husks into the air where the wind would catch the light husk material while the dense grains would fall directly into a cloth below.

We might see this both applying to people as wheat and tares or sheep and goats and also to individuals needing to sort out the husk and stalk in their lives from the good fruit they might have as well.

The threshing floor was a place of separation from where the good grain could be collected.

It's a sorting place.

But there is still more separation involved in this threshing word. While grain was the prime product the 'thresh' -or dry stalk and husk- was still a useful resource. It was used to provide a dry flooring material that covered the beaten earth and could be refreshed when dirty. The 'thresh-hold' was the bottom plate of the door frame which beyond its structural purpose also served to hold the 'thresh' in place within a room.

Again this is a separation marking off one space from another, the room with thresh or wheat stubble on the floor from outside.

So threshing floors and thresholds are all about separation. They represent places and processes where spiritual separation happen.

Last week's reading from Malachi 3 about the refiner's fire brings the same message John the Baptist is bringing here but related to refining metals.

The founder of the Salvation Army was William Booth who seemed to understand the need for threshing very well. He was known to often say: "If you want to change the future you must first disturb the present."

That is what John does in this sermon. He disturbs the present settled delusions of those before him to bring about a threshing and he is very effective in this.

This brings about conviction. In verse 10 we read,

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Can anyone remember when the world or NZ society last asked the Church the question: “What then should we do?” That has not stopped some parts of the church trying to tell society what it should do, even when not asked. Yet it happens three times here. John has reached them with conviction via threshing.

One thing to note here is that John is a prophet when most church leaders are typically pastors or administrators. Pastors gather, feed and protect - which is how it is meant to be. Administrators arrange and order - which is how it is meant to be. Meanwhile, prophets speak the hot word of God for today and it can be cutting - which is how it is meant to be. Prophetic words can be threshing words that call for separation which can be disturbing in several ways. Yet threshing words also lead people into a new season, a new space, a new future with God. They call people over a threshold from where they are away from the thresh to the new space.

So that’s the first part of the answer to what was going on between, “You brood of vipers...” and Luke’s summary description of this as “exhortations, and good news to the people”.

There was a threshing and it caused people to seriously ask: “What then should we do?” and then hear John’s specific prophetic instruction to them as teaching from God.

It opens us to change which precedes all spiritual growth.

## **Part B Expectation**

So with signs of real spiritual activity happening around John a sense of expectation arose around him. In verse 15 we read,

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with **expectation**, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.

New expectation leads to fresh questions. Something is happening, but what does it mean? This seems like God but what can we expect from this?

Being a scriptural people these expectations were considered in light of the words of the prophets. That’s what biblical and gospel centred people do.

The people in John’s day carried a prophetic messianic expectation that God would send someone to address all that was wrong in the world and redeem Israel.

So the obvious question was, might John be that awaited Messiah?

John of course knows he is not but speaks of the one who is coming to sharpen their salvation expectancy.

“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

In John’s red hot economy chaff was not even good to cover floors. It was to be burned - end of story.

The point for us here is that when people got a sense of God at work and expectations rose, they referred to what God had said previously through the prophets and in the scriptures. They referred to what they knew of God’s story and worked from there. This led them to fruitful discernment.

### **Application**

So the reason John’s sermon could start with addressing people as a brood of vipers and end being assessed as exhortations and good news is

1. because he spiritually threshed the people who then sought instruction and
2. in their expectancy they referred to the Story of God and God’s promises to them.

The 50 year old Beatle’s film that Chris described last week needed cleaning and digital editing to bring out the obscured speech recordings and overcome the grainy 1960s TV format. That is what people like us have to do when our sense of God’s Story and his promises have been dulled and overlaid with distortion. The story needs to be dusted down and refocused.

John gave people a fresh sharp description of the coming Messiah and focused people on that.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

He will thresh, gather and burn.

Here is my sense of that for St Matthew’s

Three years ago this church experienced a threshing.

It was a painful separation leaving people on either side of those church doors.

It still has deep impact on many of us.

Having been here now seven months I get a sense of people here carrying various expectations for the post threshing future. What is the future? What needs to be done

After a painful threshing there are various expectations possible as to what God might be doing?

1. Restoration. Rebuild as before. *I don’t think so. Some delusion should never be restored!*
2. Nothing really so resignation as we limp along and fade out. *Ho Hum!*
3. Wonder and wait for something to happen.
4. Frozen in grief and anger.
5. Fanciful dreams and imaginings. eg: Student will come back.

What I want to commend is that we consider what our current expectations may be and review them. They need to be threshed.

The ones to hold are those resting on God’s clear words. Might that be biblical? Deluded expectations need to be let go of.

So our natural go-to in forming expectations needs to be what God has clearly spoken to us and to hold on to that.

I expect that like that 50 year old Beetle's film, some of us are living out of a faded sense of expectation or even expectations that do not flow from what God has said.

Let me ask a question:

**Q3:** What has God said that shapes your expectations for St Matthew's after its threshing?

What can we refer to and hold firm before God as His word to us?

What words from God are leading us into the new future?

**A3:**

1. I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18

2. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Matthew 18:20

3.

4.

5.

Let's pray out of them: