

Two Baptisms, A Global Transformation

John doesn't mince words.



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

3:8 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.

It's not one's ancestry, it's not about one's beliefs, it's not about one's grand philosophical system. None of these things will save us “from the wrath that is to come”. I'm not sure what the wrath is that John is referring to, but it has something to do with the inevitability of more violence and more misery unless we change our ways—that is, repent.

John's baptism apparently is a *response* to a changed heart, a sign that you have already had a change of heart. It's not a *means* of grace. It's not an spiritual insurance plan. Those who have come to be baptized ask the next logical question. “What must we *do*?” Again, not what must we believe. Not, what

must we think. Rather what's the action that is being asked of me.

It's simple and yet for some reason eludes us in the 21st century. Share so that nobody goes without. Stop being greedy. Quit making money unethically. Treat people like human beings who are made in the image of G_d. I was watching a documentary called Human. An Australian aboriginal noted that in his ancestral language there is no word for "please" and "thank you". It's just assumed that those without have a right to receive from the community if they are in need. Why would you need a name for this exchange? It's inconceivable that a few would have more than their share when there were others that had nothing.

To the tax collectors, who made their profit by charging above the Roman quota they were given, John directs them to be fair. No gouging.

To the Roman soldiers, who used threats of violence and the capacity to falsely accuse in order to blackmail, John says, stop it.

These actions reflect the darkness that sets in when we live with the illusion that we are separate from, and therefore in competition with, other humans. The darkness set in right about the time Empires got the idea that they should monopolize local cultures, decimating village life and a more indigenous sensibility portrayed by the story of the aboriginal above. This is probably why Jesus fought so hard to restore community after Rome entered and tried to turn Palestine into a mini-Rome, a mono-phony of civic life. Fast forward a couple thousand years, add industrialization and neo-liberal capitalism to the mix, the globalization of the golden arches and you have the decimation of community with the rise of individualism, (along with McD.'s 1/4 pounder in Paris).

John comes along with his ancestral memory of a time when humans naturally took care of each other. I don't want to romanticize this – even in indigenous communities there was inter-tribal warfare, but at least within a tribe it was unthinkable that an individual would go without. He sees the breakdown of human society and calls them to ethical repentance.

I guess this was quite radical, because his call to behave properly causes some to think that he must be the Messiah. But he says no, one is coming who will baptize, not just with water, but with “fire”! There is a baptism of water, for the forgiveness of sins. And there is this other baptism, that is aimed at burning away all the cultural, historical, personal trauma that causes one to believe that we are so separate from each other that we can just stop taking care of each other.

This illusion of separation requires strong medicine to overcome. Especially in contemporary Western society. We value privacy and independence above all else, even though it's making us miserable and lonely. We don't always recognize our misery or loneliness though. It just feels like a soul-sickness. We know that something is wrong. But it seems to be the only game in town.

To receive the baptism of the Nazarene is to have all of this separation, born of trauma, burned away. It doesn't mean that we can't enjoy solitude. Our souls long for solitude. But when solitude is not contained by a community that shares, that looks out for one another, that does life together, does ceremony, honours the ancestors, mentors the young, gives back to Earth, it becomes soul-crushing loneliness.

John's baptism is a behavioral correction. It's critical when we're lost to hear a clear voice saying Stop It. This is no way to live. It's an outside-in shift. The baptism of Jesus is an perceptual and perspectival correction. It's a corrective to how we see reality. It's an inside-out shift. Both

baptisms are necessary and complimentary. The baptism by fire is more permanent because everything that is not love is burned away, and all you are left with is compassion for self and other.

The church needs both baptisms. What the church does so well is respond to John's call to do the right thing. The executive secretary of B.C. conference of the United Church of Canada wrote that over 1/2 of the UCC churches in British Columbia is sponsoring a Syrian refugee family. It made be proud to still be associated with the church. The baptism of Jesus is also necessary, because we can't just go back home to our private silos and live by the ethics of this capitalist system, and then come to church and respond to the next crisis. At some point, we have to get purged by the refiner's fire, and challenge the system itself. Because our souls know from the inside-out that we are one with G_d, with Earth, and with each other.

Luke 3:7-18

3:7 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?"

3:8 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.

3:9 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."

3:10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

3:11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

3:12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

3:13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

3:14 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."

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 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.

3:17 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."

3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.