

“Baptism of Jesus”

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

What I know about wheat can be summed up in one sentence: I love bread. I love whole wheat bread and 7 grain bread and oatmeal bread – Pepperidge Farm Light Style is my go-to for sandwiches. I love brown bread and white bread. I love French bread, ciabatta, focaccia, sourdough, dinner rolls, biscuits, and almost any other bread you can name except rye. Really, if I could just eat bread and cheese and chocolate all the time, I’d be pretty happy.

But since I buy my bread at the store or eat it at restaurants, I don’t know much about getting from the wheat to the bread. I did make bread once, and I enjoyed the part where you get to knead the dough, but I don’t grow wheat, and I’ve never even visited a farm that does. I don’t think about the process of harvesting the wheat from the field and turning it into the flour that is used to make the bread. I just eat it. Often with butter.

So, I did a little research. Please bear with me if you already know this. I promise there will be a point.

Processing wheat is called threshing: the purpose is to break grain into its different components: the wheat, which consists of kernels and chaff, the husks that hold the kernels, and the straw that holds the grain up. Threshing is how you break it up. Winnowing is how you separate the grain from the other parts.

Of course today there are machines to do this, but in Jesus’ time the options were more limited.

You could separate it by hand, pulling the head of grain off the stalk and rubbing it between your fingers to get to the kernel.

Or you could thresh the wheat by beating it against something or walking across it. But on the large scale, here’s how it worked. There was a threshing floor, a large flat space, often on the top of a hill. And there was a sledge, a rectangular piece of wood with “teeth” of stone or flint or iron on the underside. Oxen or mules pulled

the sledge across the floor to separate the grain from the straw. Then there was a winnowing fork that was used to toss the threshed wheat into the air allowing the wind to blow away the chaff and the heavier wheat to fall to the ground to be gathered and then sifted to remove the dirt.¹

This is the process that John describes in his metaphor about Jesus and his winnowing fork. One of the ways we've heard this preached is that some of us are wheat and some of us are chaff. The wheat is going to the good place and the chaff is going to the fire. So the idea is that you want to be the wheat and get yourself right with God because no one wants to be burned up with the chaff.

What if that's not what John means at all? What if John is suggesting that each person is a whole stalk, wheat and chaff together?

Each one of us has the healthy, desirable, good kernel of wheat that is used to make the nourishing bread.

And, each one of us needs threshing and winnowing to separate the grain from the straw. We all have chaff and straw and dirt that need to be removed.

Those traits and behaviors that no longer serve us.

Those choices we make that aren't in alignment with God's will.

Those things we've done that we ought not to have done.

Now metaphors can only take us so far – and please, gluten-free people, I hope you aren't offended by all this talk of wheat and bread.

But my point is that there aren't any totally good people (Jesus excepted.)

And there aren't any totally bad people. We all have good and bad within us.

Jesus wasn't coming to sort people into categories of good and bad.

Jesus was coming to free us from the very thing that causes us to walk away from God. Our sin.

We can't get free of it by ourselves, just as the wheat doesn't separate itself into its constituent parts without assistance. It's a process. We need help doing it – and John is saying that help comes from Jesus. Which is good news indeed.

¹ <http://www.nazarethvillage.com/blog/2016/06/29/threshing-and-winnowing-in-biblical-times/>

Big, scary *God the farmer* throwing people into the air with a human-sized pitch fork and burning the ones that land in the wrong pile is not good news.²

Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit, shaking us up, blowing away the bad stuff, and re-rooting us in relationship with God – now that's some excellent news.

When we are rooted in relationship with God, when we understand that we are claimed by God as beloved children, it changes everything.

Jesus didn't need to be baptized for the forgiveness of his sins because he was already free from sin.

But his baptism anointed him with the Holy Spirit.

His baptism proclaimed publicly and ritually his identity as beloved Son of God.

His baptism began his public ministry rooted in God and sustained him through everything that was to come.

Before he called the first disciple, before he healed the first person, before he wandered in the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, he was anointed and claimed as the Beloved Son of God. Look at what he was able to do after that.

Through baptism God claims and names us, too.

Beloved children of God.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you. (Isaiah 43:2-3)

When you know that you are beloved of God, you can walk through the fires and pass through the waters and storms of life.

When you know that you are beloved of God, you can love your neighbor, even the irritating ones, even the ones who differ from you politically, even the ones who treat you unfairly.

² Image taken from Joanna Harader, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-13-baptism-c-luke-315-17-21-22-acts-814-17>.

When you know that you are beloved of God, you don't have to be afraid of the stranger, the foreigner, those who are different from you, even those who hurt you. You don't have to be afraid of anything because you belong to God.

When you know that you are beloved of God, you have the strength and courage to stand up for others because you want everyone to experience that same love.

When you know that you are beloved of God, you can change the world, or at least the piece of the world that you inhabit.

My friends, you are beloved of God. I know I preach this a lot, but that's because I think we need to hear it again and again. Until we can name it and claim it ourselves, not just here in the walls of this house of God but out in the world where we're buffeted and shaken.

In the grocery store and behind the wheel.

At school and at work and when we're not allowed to work.

As caregivers and as care receivers.

When we're sick and when we're healthy.

When we're successful and when we've failed.

When we're full of energy and when we're weary.

When we're going with the flow and when it seems like everything is an obstacle.

When we do the right thing and when we don't.

When the chaff and the husks have been blown away by the power of the Holy Spirit, what is left is that kernel of belovedness.

You are God's beloved.

Believe that, and nothing will be the same again.