

Jan 12, 2025 Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 Jesus' Winnowing Fork

Some of us are good at living, which means we love well, have good networks of friendships, respect our health and bodies and enjoy life, and others of us struggle. Either way, there isn't anyone who understands life.

This is why when we come across someone who sounds like they know something, we may begin to wonder, "Could this person give me some of that meaning? If I follow them, will things clear up for me?"

John the Baptist has just challenged the crowd to let their lives show the fruit of repentance instead of relying on their prior position as God's people. People roared out specific questions about what that would look like in their lives, and John had specific answers. They began to wonder if this was the one they were waiting for, and hung around, hoping for some further word from God.

John the Baptist quickly let them know that he was only the warm-up act, the announcer, the DJ, not the main event. One coming would take them beyond repentance to a life with the Spirit of God. One coming would discern between reality and flim flam, between good and evil, between what was useful and what was only clutter. This One would have his winnowing fork.

A winnowing fork is an agricultural instrument that resembles a rake. A pile of harvested grain is scooped up and tossed into the air. Breezes lift the light chaff coating away and gravity brings the heavier inner grains down. This is repeated until only the grain remains and can be gathered and stored. The chaff is swept up and burned.

Winnowing is an act of discernment and judgment. The power of God in judgment mercifully removes what is serving no good purpose and hindering good purpose.

We have vast and contradictory hopes and expectations for God's work and goodness to be revealed. We can't manage to separate out what is solid and useful from what just looks promising. Ambiguity and disappointment are a daily experience. Repentance is being willing to see and let go of the ugly and useless parts of our lives.

Before John has even baptized Jesus in the story, Luke inserts the work of the winnowing fork. John's work is done and his bold preaching will land him in prison. The story continues without naming John the Baptist.

Jesus applies for baptism not because he has committed any sin, but to identify with sinners. He made himself one of us.

Luke has already told us of the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth, the virgin birth, the visits of the shepherds, the prophecies during his dedication at the Temple at 8 days old, the recognition of his spiritual life in his visit to the Temple at age 12 and Jesus's own awareness that God is his father and that his life will be focused on worship and service to God. Luke has made it clear already that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior.

So, we know that the baptism was not when Christ received his calling or anointing. The water baptism was when he accepted and stepped into his public ministry as Friend of Sinners. The dove dropping down indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the voice from heaven makes public the special relationship that God has with His Son, Jesus. This is revelation of what already was.

We repent from our own righteousness and turn away from evil when we listen to Christ and recognize him as the presence of God in the world. We can expect a winnowing, a discernment, a dropping away of what is not good in our lives. We might have hope of following this one or that one but only in Christ will we encounter divine judgment.

Any human leaders will disappoint us. Any human leader may have certain ministries to fulfill but will drop out of the story according to God's purposes. Only the one with the winnowing fork will remain, and will be faithful and true to the end.