

A Reflection on the Third Week of Advent

A Winnowing Process

The crowds John the Baptist encountered had, themselves, little reason for joy. Aware of their own need for deliverance, they felt a glimmer of anticipation that he might be the Messiah. He counseled justice and rectitude, but the promise he spoke of was something far more than they might have suspected or wanted: (He told them) "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear this threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." I used to think this passage referred to the contrast between the saved and the lost. My prayer was to be in the happy granary, not burnt in the fire.

But this is clearly a misreading of the Baptist's words. The fire is part of the baptism in Jesus and his spirit. Fire is not the fate of the lost, but the refining of the blessed. We all have our chaff, our dross, our waste. We all have our winnowing. And it is the fire of Christ that will burn it away. The burdens we carry do not make us unfit for Advent's message. They qualify us as prime candidates.

The only exit from Dante's Purgatorio was a wall of fire. Once the pain was burned away by love, the other side was Paradise, sheer joy.

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