

Sermon for Advent 3 Year C  
December 12, 2021, Church of the Ascension, Chicago  
The Rev. Meghan Murphy-Gill, *Curate*

The words mystified me: *threshing floor, winnowing fork, chaff*. They clanged in ominous tones, as if someone had taken a stick to long still bells, rusty with disuse, and whacked them violently in sudden alarm.

I was in seventh grade and somewhat mistakenly attending a school associated with the Assemblies of God, a denomination known for its Pentecostal fervor. (A long story for another time.)

But here I was studying the Bible regularly for the first time. And this passage from Luke that we read today kept coming up.

Those words, *threshing floor, winnowing fork, chaff* were the warning signs. An unquenchable fire roars just out of sight, they cautioned. A fire that cannot not be extinguished.

You should turn away *and run*.

That's how Mrs. Hodges, the English, Social Studies, and Bible teacher rolled into one-diminutive-in-stature-but-dominating-in-presence woman, put it. She struck fear into the hearts of her classroom of 13-year-olds.

And she always seemed to look right at me whenever the topic of eternal hellfire came up. Which was often. And even when eternal hellfire was not mentioned in the scripture, she had a way of working it in, reminding us of what was just beyond our vision for our teenage lives, our sure fate if we did not keep our eyes on our Bibles and our hearts and minds on our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Repent of your wicked ways, she said. To avoid an eternity in hell, you have to run in the opposite direction.

The trouble for me was there seemed no opposite direction. Every which way I turned I could smell smoke. From the length of my required skirt on chapel days (always an inch too short) to the Marian medal I wore around my neck (idolatrous, muttered Mrs. Hodges), the threat of that unquenchable fire surrounded me.

That year, my simple bedtime prayers of thanksgivings and polite requests for blessings for friends and family became anxious pleadings with God to spare me and the whole world from hell.

"Don't let me be chaff," I begged. "I want to be wheat. Spare us all the winnowing fork on your threshing floor." Alone in my bed, in the dark of night, I trembled at God's silence.

\*\*\*\*\*

A little more than two decades later, while studying the New Testament in graduate school, the professor asked the class early on if anyone had ever worked or grown up on a farm. I went to a Roman Catholic seminary where many religious orders sent the men studying to be priests, which means that I studied with men from all over the world. Cameroon, Congo, Vietnam, Mexico, El Salvador. Most of these men hailed from rural villages and had indeed experienced growing their own food out of necessity, not hobby, or had worked someone else's land to earn a wage for their families.

It was in this class that I had the opportunity to absorb the agricultural references in metaphors throughout the gospel, which helped the early followers of Jesus imagine God's reign in a society where more farmed than did not. Jesus spoke of farmers and vineyard tenants, seeds scattered, and fruits harvested.

For many classmates, *chaff*, *winnowing fork*, and *threshing floor* weren't such scary terms. Even if they themselves had not wielded a winnowing fork and taken just-harvested grain to the threshing floor, they knew what the words meant when used outside the context of Bible study.

*Threshing*, I learned from them, is the process of separating the edible grains of wheat from its stalk after the harvest has been reaped, that is, cut down and gathered. It's done on a *threshing floor*. A *winnowing fork* is used to separate the grain from the papery, outer husk, which is inedible. That papery outer shell, yes, you've guessed it, is the *chaff*.

That chaff surrounds the kernel of wheat on the stalk during the growing period. It's a protective layer that allows the wheat berry – the fruit of the wheat plant – to grow without shriveling in the heat of the sun or to be drowned when the rains come. I

It's so light that when, with a winnowing fork, the farmer tosses the grain into the air, it blows away in the breeze usually created by a fan of some sort. The kernels that are then exposed are far more substantial than the chaff, and so they fall to the ground.

\*\*\*\*

For more than a decade, I'd read John the Baptist's reference to the wheat and the chaff as a symbol for the haves and the have nots. The wheat were those who had Jesus, who had accepted him into their hearts as their lord and savior, while the chaff had not, hence their being cast into the unquenchable fire. Hence my prayers to be wheat, not chaff.

But that interpretation doesn't acknowledge that chaff is part of the wheat itself. It serves a purpose. While the wheat grows, the chaff protects the wheat berries, those kernels of potential. When planted as seed, the sugars stored in the berry become food for a new plant while it's under the soil, waiting to be warmed and watered into new life. That plant will then grow and produce even more berries. When eaten whole as food, wheat provides substantial nutrients, sating hunger and sustaining life. When dried and milled, it becomes flour, which can then be mixed with water, salt, and yeast in a mysterious combination that transforms into bread.

The chaff protects all that potential. But when the time has come for harvest, the chaff is no longer needed. To keep it would limit that potential. Wheat still surrounded by chaff cannot be planted, eaten, or milled.

And so it must be shaken loose, whether by winnowing fork or in the mysterious inner workings of a combine tractor. Then it's blown away, and burned.

The funny thing is, having learned a bit about this process, I've come to think that Mrs. Hodges was right in her emphasis of our need for repentance. But what repentance means for me has been cracked open, like grain between the stones of a mill.

\*\*\*\*\*

"But what should we do?" asked the crowds.

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

"What should we do?" cried the tax collectors.

"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

"What should we do?" cried the soldiers.

"Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

If you were to cry out, "What should we do?" How would John the Baptist answer?

Would his response alarm you? Would it send up smoke signals? Would it make you want to run in the opposite direction?

What would he tell you to cast off in order to make way for Emmanuel, God with us?