

BREAD-MAKING
Sermon for Advent 2A—Mt 3:1-12
LPC, 12/8/13

I want you take a look at this. This is a loaf of my husband Rich's bread. It is a beautiful thing. The crust is crunchy, the crumb (which I have learned is the technical term for the interior texture of the bread) is white and light and moist and full of holes and a perfect delight to every sense: sight, smell, taste, feel, even the sound when you break off a piece.

This paragon is a result of much practice, much trial and error. The proper equipment was necessary, including a special stone which is placed in the bottom of the oven and moistened before baking the bread to recreate the atmosphere of a brick oven. Over the past couple of years Rich has perfected his technique and researched the best recipes and ingredients.

This particular baguette is the culmination of much effort that may not be immediately apparent. It didn't happen overnight. This loaf represents but the latest stage in an evolution that started long ago. Many intermediate steps were necessary before the flour for this loaf was even ground. In short, this loaf of bread is a small miracle.

What is an even greater miracle is that this bread ultimately came from something like this (wheat stalk.) Imagine this as a green plant and the journey between these two articles is even more remarkable. Apparently the making of bread goes back about 30,000 years in human history. How in the world did prehistoric humanity discover that something like this growing wild (wheat stalk) could be prepared to make something like this (bread)?

It could not have been as simple as discovering that parts of the plant were edible and nutritious. The plant had to be dried, winnowed to remove the inedible parts, ground, mixed with other ingredients and cooked. The end result, this (loaf) cannot easily be conjectured from this (plant.) Oh sure, we in the twenty-first century, after millennia of human bread-making know that this (loaf) comes from this (plant) but how did the first bread-makers ever figure it out?

However it happened, the long-term effects of bread-making on humanity were stupendous. In fact, bread may be said to be the foundation of civilization. Cultivating grain for bread required being able to stay in one place while the plants grew to maturity. To do this, humans stopped wandering about in search of game and berries, and settled, eventually forming communities. Communities grew, roles in the community became specialized, and modern economies were born.

There's a lot riding on this little plant.

Obviously I am not here this morning to teach about the prehistory of agriculture. I am making a point about how much has to happen before this (plant) becomes something useful to the world. The evolution of plants into bread is something that can shed light on

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John the Baptist's message of repentance and preparation for the Lord.

JBap's (as I like to call him) last words in today's story even use grain-preparation as a metaphor for what Jesus will do when he comes: "His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

This is commonly taken to mean that Jesus will determine which of us is wheat and which is chaff. According to this interpretation, some of us will be gathered to God and some of us will burn eternally in hell. I am not sure this is exactly what JBap means.

Winnowing is the process of removing the useless parts of the dried plant, the husks, from the usable portion, the seed. On a breezy day, bunches of the grain, loosened by threshing, are tossed into the air with large forks. The lighter husks, the chaff, blow off and the heavier edible portion falls to the floor. The edible wheat is then gathered together to be ground into flour. What remains of the chaff is burned.

Here's the first thing I think is interesting. The husks that make up the chaff were not always useless. They were necessary while the plant was growing to protect the precious seed. It is only when the time comes to turn the plant into nutritious and beautiful food that the chaff is discarded.

Thus the chaff in JBap's analogy does not represent the evil people who will be sent to hell. The chaff represents the parts of ourselves that have served their purpose and must be discarded if we are to be made by God into something beautiful and useful to God. Then will God gather us to God's self.

The difficulty is that some of us, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees in today's story, like to hold onto our chaff.

Here's the second thing I think is interesting. What the wheat becomes eventually, this beautiful and delicious bread, cannot really be imagined from what it starts out as, a leggy green plant. The transformation is total and miraculous and totally dependent upon a force larger than ourselves: God.

Therefore, the repentance JBap calls for is not some dreary self-negating discipline, but a process of joy, humility and hope. If we let God transform us we will become something beautiful and useful to God in God's plan to redeem the universe. We do have to let ourselves be threshed and winnowed of our chaff however. But how beautiful we will be! Something we cannot, at this point, even imagine!

I told you last week that each Sunday of Advent I would draw from the lessons another piece of your armor of light. Last week it was honor: cultivating the kind of life that honors both God and our neighbor. This week the word is hope, drawn from the Letter to the Romans, and expressing the trust that God can and will make us into the people God wants us to be: something useful, beautiful, nutritious and transformative for the world.