

Who Can Endure?

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
A new church for a new day, in Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 9, 2012, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.
Scripture: Luke 3:1-18 and Malachi 3:1-4
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The desert is cold tonight. It can get so hot in the day and so cold at night, this unloved place. But those people, they stink of the city. I can only scrub them so much. They tell me their hard-luck stories – how they have been defaced, debased, dishonored. Sometimes their sorry souls leave draglines behind them in the dust. What did they come to this wilderness to see? Am I only a hollow reed to them, blowing a tune not my own? I know who I am, and who I am not. When I can't take it anymore, I just walk away. Sometimes their voices eat at me like lice.

So I need to come here, to this spot out here, to this rock under the stars, away even from those who come up into the wilderness. I can be alone here. And alone, I am myself, and tonight, with little moon, the stars sprinkle their half-light from the heavens. I like it best when there is no moon at all, and no small fires.

Those people call me “devourer of devourers” because of the little locust I eat. In truth, I am no devourer. **I** am consumed. I am engulfed by a passion, by a refiner's fire that melts me, that purifies me. And I have no desire to be with them – any of them.

I am sick of the smells of their little lambs and their goats, the stench of their domesticated ways. I know that tomorrow, or the next day, I will go back to the river. And they will be there. And I will throw hard words at them, like rocks thrown to keep carrion birds off a corpse. Not out of respect for the corpse, mind you, but to keep them from becoming fascinated with death.

It is the Awful Breath that drags me where I do not want to go. Ever since the time I was in my mother's half-lit womb, it drags me. Like a fox kit by the scruff of the neck, it drags me. “Here,” it commands, “practice saving them. Now here – practice renouncing them. Go here, John. Eat this terrible knowledge.”

Then, when I cannot look at the crowds another moment, I walk away. And the Awful Breath always lets me go. That's the horror of it. I can leave whenever I want – and I don't leave. Or, more truthfully, I always come back. We have been a long time alone together, this Breath and me. It is what I know. Is it who I am?

O Breath, why have you made me see? The Temple has been compromised, our faith has been compromised. How will we be ready? His refiner's fire doesn't just consume **me**; it will consume **us all!** And we have softened the edge of our identity as God's children. We have accommodated the culture and its values. We have given tacit approval of imperial militarism and cynical acceptance of social violence. We are casually indifferent to the suffering of the poor.

I shout my condemnations to this brood of vipers. They know – at least for a moment – that not even their birthright can save them. Nothing they can do can save them.

Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? No one. Not one of us can endure, and so we must rely on his grace, his love. And then do what is right. Do what is just.

That crowd today. What must we do, John? What must we do? It's not that hard. If you have what you need, share the rest. If you have a job, don't use it to extort or steal. Do what is right and just.

They come. I suppose that's a good sign. They are seeking the reign of God and they come out here to this unloved place thinking that I might have some key, some insight. At least they've come out here looking. If we ever find the reign of God it will be in unexpected places, it will be out here on the margins.

It doesn't matter who the emperor is, or who they've set up as governor of Judea, or who is ruling Galilee or any other region, or even who the high priest is. But out here, what's happening out here among the unloved – that's what matters.

Out here is where we need to prepare the way of the Lord. Here is where we build a highway for God's chosen one, a straight highway, a smooth highway. Out here.

But maybe I come out here to escape, too. In the cities I see far too many people who live in fear and despair, I see far too many children starving and dying. As if the wealth that's concentrated in the hands of the Roman elite and the Jewish collaborators would somehow trickle down to those who are most in need. Poverty seems to flow down much faster than money or justice. And when a day laborer can't earn enough to feed his family ...

Out here I'm able to notice these two blessings that are always at hand: this breath and this moment. This breath and this moment: the currency of God's grace. That's what empowers me to stand; that's how I can endure.

Repent! Repent! Repent! Keep turning back to God. This breath. This moment. Keep turning back to God. We can't endure. We can only trust in God's grace and then do what is right.

Do they hear that this call isn't only for us as individuals? This is a call for our whole nation! We Jews can easily see the sins of Rome – Rome that thinks it can do no wrong – but we are so blind to our own sin. And it's not just the things that we do, the injustices that we perpetrate. It is also the things we fail to do, the justice we fail to administer. War, violence, nationalism, and militarism.

My father used to say that God was sending one "to guide our feet into the ways of peace." And I believe that the promised Prince of Peace is coming.

Ezekiel said that the sin of Sodom was this: "She and her daughters had pride of wealth and food in plenty, comfort and ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."

But they don't hear this good news. They don't understand that this **is** good news. This is an invitation to salvation. This is an invitation to the reign of God. This is our hope as we build a way for God's Chosen One.

So, every evening, after a day of dunking flesh in the river, I return to this rock. Sometimes at night I feel there is someone out there – watching me, hunting me. I am only a desert rat; he is the descending raptor. But I am not frightened. I know I am too small, too weak, to break the binding cords he has fashioned for himself. He has lashed shut his beak and wrapped his talons to prevent himself from eating me whole. Yet, I feel his eye on me.

Soon the mountains will uncover their shy pink smile for me. Rather than go to them like a lover, I will descend to the river again. I will breathe the awful stink of my people. I will say to them, “By me you are drowned in water, but there is one who pursues me – stronger and greater than me – who will flood you with the Awful Breath.”

Even now I know he is coming closer. Even now I know what will happen to him. The Breath will drive him out straight into the unloved places. There he will be pierced by demons. He will be led like a burdened beast by strange creatures who will tend to him and love him. And, when the time comes for me to be given away, he will rise up. He will herald “Yahweh is salvation” and will show forth the God-forward foundations of power. Even as the stars wash away in dawn, I turn – exposing my belly to him. My death. My life. My God.

This sermon is based largely on:

Rose Marie Berger, “Being John the Baptist,” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0303&article=030366&mode=sermon_prep&week=C_Advent_2 (4 December 2012). This was the inspiration for the sermon. The beginning of the sermon (the first 6 paragraphs) and the end of the sermon (the last 3 paragraphs) are taken from this essay and modified only slightly.

Additional sources used:

Walter Brueggemann, “Back to Basics,” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_091249_CAdvent2&week=C_Advent_2 (4 December 2012).

Joyce Hollyday, “For What?” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_941249_CAdvent2&week=C_Advent_2 (4 December 2012).

Jim Rice, “Where is the God of Justice?” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_971149_CAdvent2&week=C_Advent_2 (4 December 2012).

Marie Dennis, “Partnership in the Approaching Miracle,” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_911249_CAdvent2&week=C_Advent_2 (4 December 2012).

Julie Polter, “Re-Rooting Ourselves in God,” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0812&article=re-rooting-ourselves-in-god&mode=sermon_prep&week=C_Advent_2 (4 December 2012).

Joyce Hollyday, “Take a Seat,” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_941249_CAdvent3&week=C_Advent_3 (4 December 2012).

Jim Rice, “Rejoice in the Lord!” *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_971149_CAdvent3&week=C_Advent_3 (4 December 2012).

Mark O. Hatfield, "Repentance, Politics, and Power," *Sojourners*,
http://archive.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj7401&article=740106&mode=sermon_prep&week=C_Advent_3 (4 December 2012).