My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

I hope that today’s sermon title resonates with most of you. What does “Let’s Make a Deal” mean to you? (take all answers). Yes, HOPEFULLY it gives an image of a goofy game show where people dressed up in all sorts of get-ups to attract attention of the game-show host and then play some kind of crazy game where they had the chance to answer some questions and then, based on that, won a prize of varying quality. And from there, what happened? They were then tempted by the host to give up what they had won, with the promise of the possibility of getting a better prize behind door number 1, 2, or 3. Or inside this big trunk or under that smaller box, or inside the envelope that Monty Hall or Blair Underwood was holding for the next 30 seconds only and then the deal would be gone.

What we don’t see on this, or any game show, is the story of the contestants. Usually all we get is a first name and perhaps a fun fact about how they got on the show or their weird hobby that the show’s producers think should be shared. But we don’t know anything about who they really are. Who they REALLY are. What’s happened in their lives that got them to this point. Where they have loved and lost. Why and how they are right here, right now. We are only left to guess, aren’t we?

Would it make a difference if we knew more of their backstories? Would we root for them more depending on if we could identify with their struggles? How do we make assumptions about others we know so little about, and yet are asked to help them make decisions that may be life altering? How permanent are the choices of Door Number 2? Or deciding not to trade in the unknown contents of an envelope?

This is a little bit like what we’re witnessing in today’s scripture readings. Today’s Zephaniah passages describes a day of rejoicing. The Lord has returned and joins all the people in celebration. All peoples will be restored and rejoined together in joy and love. No fear. And restoring the honor and dignity of all.

But what we’re getting is the very end verses of the Book of Zephaniah. What is NOT described were the many circumstances that led up to this point. The people of Israel have been scattered, and even in being conquered they turned their back on God and faithful following of God. God has looked even to the ends of the earth for the remnant who might be far from Jerusalem but remember the promises of long ago rather than abandoning God for their current comforts. God’s disappointment falls on only a few who will do as God has always asked: remember God first, and build up a strong community who value one another in God’s love as their primary *raison d’etre*.

The folks in the final verses are not the partying many. They are the fortunate few, the remnant, who have taken the time and work to reflect on their lives and prepare for a time when Jerusalem is no longer under Assyrian or Babylonian control. And for those who have prepared for that day, which will come without warning, joy is overflowing. Oh, and by the way, until then, living in loving community with God at its center, joy is also overflowing, even in exile, captivity, poverty, and famine.

These folks went through a lot. Maybe they do deserve a big prize at the end of the struggle, with no Zonks and just good stuff being behind whatever door is selected for them or by them.

In Luke’s Gospel, we’re many years later from the time of Zephaniah. We have quite a crowd gathered, and they’re asking John the Baptist all kinds of questions. Now, we sometimes reduce John the Baptist to a person who screams “repent” and is more expert at creating fear and guilt than actually getting folks to change their lives. But here, he addresses the inequities of the society in which he lives. I think we all might agree these observations and advices could be summarized as “don’t be a jerk”. But he also says they came to the point of asking for ordinary advice because they have forgotten God’s promises, that they should be good to one another, or as Jesus would later say, “Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself”. But as the people look to him for more and more, they wonder if he’s who they should look to for all guidance. He seems to be giving good advice to all people, and they cheer him on.

They were filled with expectation. Pick door #1.

They want someone right now who they can not just see, but also keep giving them guidance. John, however, does not accept the crowd’s adulation. He quits playing the game, and tells them there is another who is greater and can do more. Their expectation is misplaced with him. It should be given to the one who can separate the wheat from the chaff, and burn it away.

Now you’re probably saying to yourself that we’re drifting further and further away from joy here. But that’s also where we’d be mistaken that we’re surrounded by zonkers and there’s no more rejoicing in sight. Let’s reset a minute.

John’s baptism can give repentance and forgiveness. But that’s not enough to trigger joy, because it’s looking backward, and not as present and forward as God’s promise of Spirit and renewal. Spirit and Fire, in this passage, can also mean wind and fire. And if we look at a baptism of wind and fire, then winnowing is an act of wind to separate the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff is to be burned up, right? Do we city folks (not being farmers) really understand the purpose of winnowing?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts as we answer that question. The purpose of winnowing is to save the grain. This passage is not meant for us to obsess over whether we are wheat or chaff, and start obsessing over the list of shoulda woulda coulda’s around either list. Chaff is simply the stuff that we should not be doing in our lives, and wheat is the seed from which more can grow, the grain that feeds us and our souls. John’s listeners knew, and any farmer still does, that abundance and plenty depended on getting as much grain as possible without any other stuff interfering. Winnowing isn’t about fire, although there’s a lot of preachers out there who would like to convince us otherwise. It’s about the wheat. And that’s what creates the great expectation that John is trying to pass along from himself to the one who we are expecting this Advent season.

We don’t need to jump around in costumes to try and win something to feel good about ourselves. We know our deeper story is one of belonging through suffering, yes, sacrifice, yes, but also hope and love. There is no greater need in the human heart than for divine love. Beneath every other valid need is the need to be loved by the One who knows us better even than we know ourselves.

If we are to take Advent seriously and to prepare for the new life that Christ’s entry into the world and our lives offers, we have to go through a threshing of our souls. Water, wind, and fire. Bring it on. That gives me great joy, and it’s why we call our Gospel, “the Good News.”

Thanks be to God, Amen.