So here are a few of the things John the Baptist says in today’s Gospel lesson from Luke:

* You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
* Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
* His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

And so how does Luke wrap up all of these sayings from John the Baptist? He ends by saying, “with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Winnowing forks, vipers, unquenchable fire, in Luke’s telling it is all good news. And if this did not come from “The holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” we might be able to dismiss it and say that maybe something was lost in the translation, maybe it was supposed to say the not so good news. But since it is in the Gospel, we can’t just ignore it. So, what are we to make of it? How can it be good news that the wrath is coming?

Before going on to talk about what we can take from this passage let me explain a bit of what I think John the Baptist believed he was telling people. This wrath of which he spoke was not some detached event. In other words, it is not carpet bombing where God was going to wipe out people at random, but rather it is very targeted. It was directed against those who were not living lives in accordance with God’s will. I realize, of course, that any discussion of wrath or judgement is met with suspicious if not outright contempt in our day and age but it is there. And so my goal today is, to paraphrase *Dr. Strangelove*, I want you to learn to stop worrying and love the idea of wrath or something like that. Because there is a different way to think about wrath, which is that wrath shows us that God is paying attention. Let me explain.

As most of you know I serve as a Chaplain in the Air Force. One of the things that this does is bring me into contact with a number of types of people I would not normally come in contact with on the rough and tumble streets of Delafield. Many of the young men and women I have encountered come from, to put it mildly, less than ideal home lives. Their families might be dysfunctional, abusive or might hardly be there at all. Coming into the military has, for some of them, been the first time that anyone cared about what they did in a consistent manner. Growing up no one cared when they came home, how they did in school, what or if they ate and so on. Now what I am about to say is not universal but I have encountered it enough to see a pattern and that is one of the things these types of individuals appreciate about the military is that someone notices. If they do something wrong it is corrected (not always in the most charitable way) and if they do something right it is noticed and often rewarded. Justice in the military is not always administered with the Wisdom of Solomon but the system is there. The system is designed to pay attention to each individual and the behavior of that individual. And the discussion John the Baptist has about wrath today is much the same – it is God noticing.

Certainly, we look out at the world and say, “How long O lord shall the wicked prosper?” but then when God says that he is going to do something about it, we worry that He is being a little mean. I assume that most of you are like me and did not see the rather strong language of John the Baptist this morning as good news. I am not sure any of us want to live in a way where every wrong action is instantly and brutally delt with. I talked about young airmen responding positively to having some guardrails on their existence, but since only .4% of the U.S population currently serves in the military it does not seem to be a real popular option in our society. So, why do we get a little hesitant when we start talking about God actually doing anything about the problems in the world? Why do most of us not long for the good times that is basic training in the military?

Well, I don’t know if I have a complete answer but the issue seems to be tied to the idea that we want both justice and mercy. I don’t have a great explanation as to why we want this but the good news is God understands this seeming contradiction as well. I don’t want to give away too much of what happens after Christmas in the life of Jesus but Jesus does not end up looking exactly like what John the Baptist’s understanding was of what the Messiah was going to do. In John’s telling the Messiah’s coming was going to involve a lot of Old Testament wrath. The Messiah in John’s telling was kind of like the old adage that if you have a hammer every problem looks like a nail. There was injustice on the earth, so the cure for it was to take it all, cut it down and throw it into the fire. Would it be just? Certainly, it would. But I think we recoil because it would not be merciful. And mercy is what makes Jesus’ coming so exciting.

Let’s have a little history. The story of our salvation begins with the idea of justice. The Ten Commandments and another 600 or so other laws in the Old Testament spell out for us how to live. The deal was if you follow the rules then there will be no wrath to stamp out our bad behavior. It all relied on us and our ability to live into God’s will. So naturally this morning when John the Baptist looks around at the wickedness of his age, he can think of only one way for the Messiah to solve the problem – mass carnage. But that is not what happens is it? Jesus does not come with the winnowing fork in his hand because God understands mercy as well as justice. Jesus comes to strike that balance.

Does this mean that we can simply do whatever we want and that God will pat us on the head and say that is okay? No, Jesus tells us that he did not come to replace the law. There are still guardrails. There are still ways that we are called to live. God still notices when we stray like lost sheep. But the thing is God realizes that we are not capable in our own power of saving ourselves. That is the balance that is struck in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus serves as that bridge to join us with God when our sin separates us.

I started off this sermon by saying that wrath is not real popular these days when we think of God. Most people, if they think of God at all, look at him in the same way they look at Santa – he may know whose been naughty and nice but doesn’t really do anything about it – you still get something under the tree. But I don’t think we can completely disregard the words of John the Baptist and his claim of good news because it is good news, just not all of the good news. The good news that John the Baptist tells us is that God is paying attention and that he cares about our behavior. Our society does need some guardrails. We need to live a little more with the realization that our sin is a real problem. Like those young men and women in basic training who want someone to notice their behavior we need to realize that we, with God’s help are called to live lives that acknowledge the love God shows in sending his son so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.