

In ~~the~~ Matthew 3 passage for today, John the Baptist minces no words with the Pharisees and Sadducees, who probably came out more for the show by the Jordan than to get baptized. He called them poisonous snakes and told them that if they had any interest in avoiding the winnowing fire, they had best show the fruits of their repentance. He told them that no secondhand faith from Abraham (from ancestral fathers and mothers) would suffice.

The knowledge of the Lord that our parents may have had cannot be passed on to us, because knowledge involves being Christlike, and that means being obedient. The person who lives near you, attends church, or teaches your Sunday school class cannot give you his or her knowledge. The church staff, your spouse, your parents, and your friends may all live with a knowledge of God, but it is up to you to seek the Lord for yourself. That is the only way to have paradise restored.

From a human standpoint, Isaiah is too optimistic. From a divine aspect, God requires us to be like Isaiah, to give up our enemies, to live in accord with them, to return to the pure and uncorrupted state of our birth, to live in peace.

That strange-acting man, John the Baptist, cried out, "Turn around! Time is short, because the one who comes after me, is cleaning house. Refuse will be burned" (see Matt. 3:1-12). Paul's voice was gentler, urging hospitality, harmony, rejoicing, and hope (see Rom. 15:4-13). The eyes of the blameless lamb beside the reformed wolf inspect and question us from the canvas of Edward Hicks's painting and from the poetry of Isaiah.

Do we venture to hope that during this Advent season the earth will be full of a knowledge of God, so that there will be no destruction or hurt in all of God's holy and glorious dwelling? We dare not.