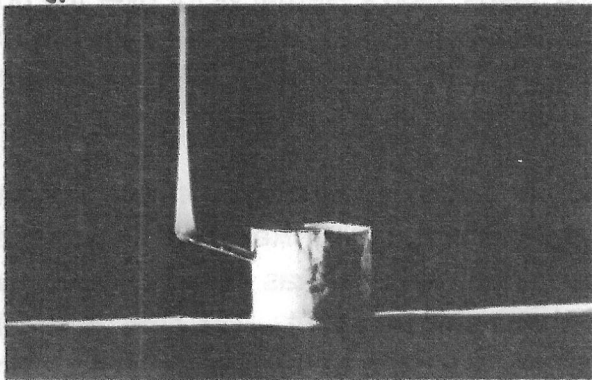


John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 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."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and 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."



"O Come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant . . ."

"Once upon a time, a merchant who was vacationing in a small village went to see the village market. At one place he saw a man with a genie and he asked, "what are you selling, my friend?" "My genie," replied the man. "well, what does it do?" the merchant asked. "Everything you want to get done," the vendor said. "It makes the impossible possible." "Then why do you sell it?" the merchant said. "Because I have no ambitions left," the vendor said. "It is a wish fulfilling genie, but it is very exhausting. It cannot stay idle and all the time it needs a new job, a new project, or otherwise it destroys what it creates." "I have lots of ambitions, lots of jobs to be done," the merchant said, I'll buy it." When they reached the place where the merchant stayed, the genie said, "Now, sir, tell me what I can do for you. Your satisfaction is guaranteed, but before enjoying it you must tell me my next job." "Your first job," the merchant said, "is to build boundary walls and mark my sites." The genie clapped his hands and said, "all your sites have been enclosed, sir. Now tell me the next job." "You really are a wish-fulfilling genie. I am so happy to have you. Your next job is to create building on these sites." The genie clapped again. "It is done, my master. The factories, the theatre halls, the swimming pool and markets are crowded with people." "Fantastic," said the merchant. "Now I want you to make me king of the world. Build me a palace. Organize a coronation. Invite all the important people. Bring poets and musicians and let the dancers dance and entertainers entertain." The genie clapped again and said, "You have been accepted as the solemn monarch of planet earth. Your crown is right here. Dress yourself up and enjoy being the most powerful and important person on planet earth. But . . . before you leave, please tell me my next job." The merchant became numb. All his desires were fulfilled. Suddenly he remembered the merchant's warning. If he could not keep the genie employed, everything he had achieved so far would be destroyed. Drops of perspiration started dripping down his forehead. Only one person could possibly help him. "Genie," he commanded, "before I become the emperor of the planet earth, I would like to get the blessings of my spiritual teacher. Please take me to the holy one's cave in the Himalayas." So the genie clapped again and there he was. "Bless me, holy one, bless me," the businessman said. "I am in great trouble. I bought a wish fulfilling genie this morning

and all my desires got fulfilled. But I bought this genie on condition that I have to keep him engaged or he will destroy what he has created. And now I don't know what to do with him." The holy one was sitting naked on a straw mat and greeted the merchant with a radiant smile. "Don't worry, my son. It is very easy to provide this genie with a never-ending job. "I cannot relax," the merchant said. "I am agitated, anxious, excited, terribly disturbed and afraid. Save me "Listen carefully, my child," the holy one said. "Ask the genie to bring the biggest bamboo pole he can get. Then order him to plant it inside the ground very firm and tight. After the pole is firmly fixed to the ground, ask the genie to climb it up and down until further orders. This will keep him busy and you will enjoy your life undisturbed and fearlessly." "How stupid I am that I could not think of such a simple solution," the merchant gasped. "When one is obsessed by fear and anxiety one cannot think of such simple solutions," the holy one said. "First you were blinded by your ambitions and you bought the genie. When the genie became too fast in fulfilling your desires you got scared by the speed with which he carried out your orders. Then you got nervous by the imaginary fear of destruction. Go now, and feel free." The holy one paused for a moment, "But before you go," he went on, "know this. I too have a genie. And I, too, have a pole for it." Then the holy one opened his hands and showed the merchant his prayer beads. (Wisdom story from the Hindu tradition, from "Why is my life so hectic, p. 9).

"The story has all the earmarks of a fairy tale', wrote Joan Chittister, "except it isn't. This story is about our loves, about what it is to be an adult in a spinning world. Indeed, we all have a genie. The genie is our desire for achievement, the hope for popularity, the thirst for opportunity, the hunger for excitement, the need for success and adulation, the quest for power (p. 9).

Once upon a time, the Jews longed for God's Messiah to come and to save them from the shadows of death. Like ours today, their world was broken by violence and selfishness. The powers-that-be had arranged a world based on empire, with those at the top grabbing---through force and greed---the lion's share of power and material wealth for themselves. Religious and political leaders alike abused their position to increase the debt load on the people of the land. Rather than forgiving debt, they were increasing debt (William Herzog, New Proclamation Year C 2006).. So, one day, souls nearing their breaking point with the burden of

these life taking games, came out into the wilderness to be blessed by John the Baptist and to get on board with his strategy for turning things around. But when they arrived, instead of welcoming them into the fold, he called them a brood of vipers! What makes any of you think you are following the commands of God? What have you done lately for justice and peace among your neighbors? What have you done to respect the dignity of every human being? What have you done to bring the kingdom of God from heaven into your lives here on earth? Really?! the crowd exclaimed together. It never crossed our minds that we were playing any part in unjust power games before! Then, confounded, but still in desperate need of turning things around, they asked John, "What then, shall we do?" In reply he gave them God's doable neighborly strategy for breaking the cycle of selfishness in their hearts: Give to those who have not---redistributing wealth---giving more than what's left over after you have far more than you need or can use. Don't take more than you need. Don't take that which belongs to another.

After taking it all in, the converting brood of vipers who had begun moving with the Spirit of generosity and justice, now began thinking about deeper matters in their heart. (O. K. John that sounds like the word of God to me. So, are you the Messiah who will end violence in our world?) In humble response to this eternally critical question of faith, John replied: Absolutely Not! Jesus is the coming Holy One who will incarnate God's non-violent (active resistance to evil and refraining from doing harm) way of Love. Christ Jesus, God's eternal victor over the powers of fear and death, will be coming as Holy Spirit, eternally visiting generations yet born, to break the cycle of violence in human hearts.

Once upon a child who had never before been to a Christmas service said when asked what it was like, "I want some of that 'umphant." "What's that?" the child was asked. "You know, it's what those people were singing about---"O Come all ye faithful, joyful and try 'umphant'---"I'd like to try some of that 'umphant."