

“Dont Forget: Fire!”
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Luke 3: 15-22

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Perhaps it's fitting that on a morning when the thermometer at my house read 14 degrees, that the subject of the sermon is fire: both God's fire that warms you, as well as God's fire that refines, chastises, burns off what carries us away from God into places where God seems gone.

The Jews had been decimated by the Babylonians, dispersed and gone from home. They thought their God simply didn't have what it takes, and the Babylonian gods had triumphed. It took Isaiah to teach them it wasn't the Babylonian gods that brought their captivity, it was their turning their back on God.

Next we hear Luke's version of this same theme, at John stands ready to baptize and Jesus arrives. [Luke 3: 15-22, NRSV]

One evening the New Testament professor from Princeton Seminary visited a high school youth group. After the professor

finished speaking about the significance of Christ's baptism as an explanation of God's presence for us, this high schooler said without looking up, "That ain't what it means."

Glad that the student had been listening enough to disagree, the professor asked, "What do you think it means?" "The story says that the heavens were opened, right?" "Right." "The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God came down, right?" "That's right." The boy finally looked up and leaned forward, saying, "It means that God is on the loose in the world. And it is dangerous."

There followed a sudden silence! Where did he get the idea? Well, how about from these two fierce passages (Is.43: 1-7; Luke 3: 15-22) read this morning? First, Isaiah, then John the Baptist, neither mincing words. "Fierce" I'd call them.

Understand Isaiah and his people's desolation. God "gave up Jacob," (that's the way Isaiah recorded it in his prior chapter, ch. 42) poured out the heat of divine judgment, then burned the Israelites with the fire of war. Forsaken, brutalized, conquered, prisoners of war, and no one, not even God claimed them. What a chasm to stare into!

John, that Baptist, raises the same brutal gulf. He had toured the countryside, smashing conventions along the way. He would proclaim: The plan God had didn't allow getting in God's graces just because you came from the right family or a long string of perfect attendance ribbons at the Temple. "Baptism," he shouts in his over-the-top style, "Baptism is not a moment for sickening treacle, not

some ever-pleasant Monet landscape out here at the river! And, it's about to get worse, for the one coming, the who got his sandals at Wal-Mart just like me, – but whom I can't get close enough to the heat to ever think about unbuckling them – that one is gonna set up a fire that'll burn and smolder, ready to consume you if you don't get things right: there'll be such wind that it separates the wheat and the chaff, the hardcore from the flakey!

Whew! Fierce! Makes you want to dress in asbestos for our Sunday Biblical encounters! “Fiery!”

Dwelling deep in our own memories of God's knowing us, is a silence draping itself around those terrible moments of life; a gulf between God the almighty and me – for I fear I'm the lost, forgotten one. Is there a one of us who has not entered into prayer one day seeking solace, searching for understanding in terrible times, and found instead, silence... God's absence? God the creator of the heavens, earth, and all its people; God the source of breath and life: gone from me! God, the one who was whispering only recently in my ear, “I shaped you for myself, I created you in my image,” – that One now forsaken me. Is there any of us who have not felt it?

John's word about what comes next seems, to him, obvious. “Now there will be another, one who carries, in his word, the fire: the refining, the correcting of your waywardness, the correcting of your soul; the laying bare your pretenses and false expectations.”

I think these stories are meant to scare the pants off us, AND intend to make the good news more potent. For a flame is now to be rekindled; a tormenting fire that originally drove us out into our drifting, our love affairs with the store managers of this world's spiritual market place whom, let's face it, are always eager to sell us what they imagine we want; that same fire is going to light the dark that extinguishes our chasm. The warmth from that fire will bring us a love that embraces us in our moments of loneliness. Loneliness and fear which may have put us down for the count, will be refined in that fire, replaced by warmth.

These stories are meant to teach us we don't know what *up* looks like until we have known *down*. So when all is despondency, we have God in Isaiah's prophecy, and Jesus in Luke's, holding out startling news, good news. News that once held only terror, now, surprisingly, sounds the same: the youth group boy still says to the professor: "God, is loose, and it's dangerous." But now God, in awesome power, is relighting the light, bringing the unexpected, and we're looking forward to God's dangerousness.

Think again about Isaiah as God turns from fierce to rhapsodic. The picture Isaiah paints is not a king pronouncing dreadful edicts, but a lover, heart bursting, who has waited an eternity just to say Israel's name. "You are mine." Now, the almighty maker is the almighty lover. This God trumpets: "I will pay any price and overcome every obstacle to have Israel back. I will trade all of Egypt, and throw in Ethiopia and Arabia. You are *that* precious, I love you *that* much." Precious literally means a price, a ransom to be paid. And God pays it; brings them out of the chasm, out of the silence, out

of the terror, and home, precious home appears on the horizon, finally.

So too, Luke's Jesus. There, at the river, with the crowd awaiting baptism, suddenly comes a shock that undermines the flow of the story: John the Baptist is whisked away, sent packing to the palace, Herod's police acting on an arrest warrant for slander. John had spoken from some bully pulpit about how Herod was wrong to kill his own brother in order to inherit his brother's gorgeous wife. Now, the Baptist gets dragged off because of his own fierceness.

With his departure, the spotlight swings to the 30-year old from Nazareth, who has just walked off from his father's carpenter shop and noq a few miles down the road, has come to the river. He had evidently stood at the edge of the crowd, listening to John's oratory about the mighty change baptism brings. Then, still with water trailing off his head, there comes an eerie silence; the clouds part and down the ray of light slides a dove, a bird from paradise, preceding the message, "This one, Jesus, is mine, precious, in my sight. Isaiah must have echoed in the head of every pious Jew there.

Isaiah *should* echo in our heads, too. God comes calling and offers Jesus a new identity, no longer just a carpenter's son. At baptism, there is a call, a lifting us up by the lapels. God intends a new identity for you. You are about to be one of his beloved.

The news is there is a call to each of us, a name for each of us. That name? Beloved! Believe it. If you want to.

Or would you rather travel along with a God who didn't really claim you. A God who said, at times of your accomplishments: "Nice job." Or, when you fail utterly: "I'm sorry it didn't go your way."

With the God we worship, you're meant to live, and live well – if you're willing to walk with fire and believe God would ransom *me*. But that's far fetched, isn't it? Can you believe that? "God wants *me*?" Life wouldn't look anything like we know it to be, if we believed. Believe me. God's loose, and it could be wonderful.

Amen and Amen.