

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The First Sunday after the Epiphany:

The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ/January 10, 2016

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On this day that we celebrate Jesus' baptism there is a lot of talk about fire. "Though you walk through fire," Isaiah says. And in the Psalm, "The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire." Finally, the Baptist declares that the more powerful one "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire;" and "the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." What are we to make of all this fire talk?

Fire can be catastrophic. There is volcanic fire that is explosive. There are wildfires that are destructive, move quickly and take lives. In each case the fire is intense and overwhelming. This fire is associated with the undoing of life.

Fire is used a different way as a metaphor for God. Moses saw a bush that was aflame but not consumed and he realized that he was on holy ground. This is a strange fire that is life-giving, a most powerful fire. Fire describes the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The disciples on Pentecost were filled with the Spirit and a tongue of fire rested upon each one. This is a purifying fire in which everything is re-forged, made new. Hildegard of Bingen wrote:

Fire thou and Comforter,
Life of all creation's life,
Holy art thou, quickening all forms of being.

Isaiah and the Psalm talk about fire in the first sense. It is a frightening and destructive fire. One would not think to look for God there. God could not possibly be present in such a place of discomfort and dread. As we struggle with uncertainty, the way wind can blow a fire in unpredictable directions, it is hard to see God through the smoke or whatever it is that clouds or waters our

eyes. But why shouldn't God be present in the heat of the moment? God in Christ walked into the firestorm of Holy Week, betrayal, arrest, denial, crucifixion. Then all creation was re-forged, quickening all forms of being, as Hildegard said. God is not just in the calm and orderly, but where we are afraid and where things are uncertain.

I've never seen a forest fire. The end of the summer is wildfire season out west. Once in a while particles of smoke cause a slight haze in our eastern sky as they are carried through the atmosphere. That makes me imagine the magnitude of the fire, how terrible it must be up close. I am fascinated by the stories of those who fight this kind of fire. It is curious to me that they will sometimes start a fire to stop a fire. They create what is called a backfire. They use a drip torch to burn up the combustible material in the fire's path either to halt it or to redirect it.

The Gospel today got me thinking that baptism is like a backfire. We are born into a world where the fires of conflict and discord rage. There is clearly danger in the world. How do we halt it, or redirect it? We start a little fire in its path, a fire of love, of holiness. It is a life-giving fire. When we are enthusiastic we say we are fired up. And enthusiasm is contagious. It kindles more enthusiasm. Jürgen Moltmann writes: "Fire warms us, and we pass on the warmth. It lights us up, and we begin to shine. It consumes us, and we become a consuming flame for other people." We are baptized with Holy Spirit and fire.

A backfire is set also to burn up the tinder in a wildfire's path. This is the chaff that in the vehement words of John the Baptist "will burn with unquenchable fire." But what is this chaff, this combustible material in the path of the world's discord? Certainly it is our worry that we are not good enough. That feeling is combustible and good fuel for the world's put down of others along lines of gender, race, class, sexual orientation. How about the greed that fires economic distress, increased poverty, sometimes collapse? The backfire of baptism burns up whatever is in us that is fuel for the wildfires of the world, our reckless pride, hypocrisy, our envy, impatience, self-indulgence. The Litany of Penitence for Ash Wednesday gives a good list. If we can burn

away this fuel before the world's conflict consumes it, we will have halted a dangerous fire.

Baptism also asks, what are the voices we listen to amid the wildfires, the backfires, and the fires of the Spirit? When Isaiah imagines walking through dangerous fire the voice he hears is the Lord saying, "You are mine. I love you. I am with you." When Jesus is baptized he hears a voice from heaven say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is not chaff. It is not fuel for the world's fires. Instead, it is God continually imparting to us a life of love, commitment and devotion.

Baptism aligns us with God's purpose, with the fire of God's love. It was at his baptism that Jesus acknowledged the call to be Israel's Messiah. Psalm Two is a royal psalm about the anointed one. It mirrors the voice that Jesus heard, "You are my Son; this day have I begotten you" (2:7). Jesus would be Israel's Messiah, but not as worldly wildfire of political domination that many expected. But as the fire of love. Jesus would be, as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews, "the reflection of God's glory, the exact imprint of God's very being," That is, God's Son, even the suffering Servant, our great companion, the fellow sufferer who understands.

We too, though not the exact imprint of God's very being, have a spark of the divine within us. When we tend this spark we discover in our hearts the creative energy of God. We align our creativity with God's purpose of everyone's wellbeing. When we tend this spark, we find the power of life that God conveys to all living things. We exist in a web of interrelationship. When we tend this spark we discover an inner drive toward freedom. We do not want to be coerced, nor do we wish to coerce others. We accept freedom's responsibilities. Finally, when we tend this spark, we find a prophetic voice that speaks up for justice and peace, and respects the dignity of every human being. We need to tend this spark. It is what connects us to God's purpose; and sometimes it even bursts into a loving flame.

God's fire is greater than the catastrophic wildfires of the world. The fire of God's compassion splits the flames of discord, Isaiah says. Holy fire does not consume. It does not burn out. It gives life. When uncertainty and conflict

burn, God has a word for us: “You are mine. I love you. I am with you.” It is the same voice that Jesus heard at baptism. You are the Beloved. You will be Israel’s Messiah. And at our baptism, a backfire is lit to fight the wildfires of the world. The things that get in our way, that hold us back from giving of ourselves in love for the life of others, those things are consumed, and discordant, worldly fires are redirected or even halted. More than that, we notice a divine light within that illumines us and we begin to shine. Jesus said as much in the Sermon on the Mount: “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Amen.