

Controlled Burn

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Advent goes by so quickly. It’s already been a week, and I’m not as far along in my preparation as I’d hoped. I suspect I’m not alone.

Perhaps that’s why we encounter John the Baptist every second Sunday of Advent. He’s a bit of a madman, right? Like an ancient Sirius Black from that wanted poster in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, I picture John screaming “Repent!” with wide eyes and unkempt hair. The diet of bugs and honey only reinforces the image. In my mind’s eye, he’s got an ax in one hand and a winnowing fork in the other which he’s using to stoke a giant bonfire so it’s ready when Jesus comes. John’s appearance is odd at best; his message is downright terrifying.

In the past, I’ve sought to soften the severity of this week’s readings. I’ve sung the opening scene from *Godspell* (watch it if you haven’t). Once I asked Elton to interrupt my sermon dressed as John for comic relief. I’ve even served crickets and honey after the service (you can’t buy locusts, but

crickets are readily available in a variety of flavors). I've done this, because I realize John is "the last person in the world most of us want to see."¹ He reminds us too much of those fire and brimstone preachers in our pasts, of purity tests and promise rings, of highway billboards asking



None of us as we deck the halls this month will be hanging wall art proclaiming in elegant script: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee?"

And yet, this Advent – like every other Advent – we won't reach Jesus without hearing and heeding John. Each of the evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – identify him as God's appointed prophet sent to testify to nearness of the messiah and God's reign. Jesus is coming, John tells us, with an ax, a winnowing fork, and unquenchable fire. Why? Because the earth is God's field, and Jesus comes to bring in the harvest.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Changed into Fire" in *Gospel Medicine*, 128. I am profoundly grateful to Taylor for her thoughtful approach to this text, which deeply influenced this sermon.

Jesus will pick, cut, sort, and refine. He will gather the crop into God's storehouses; everything else, he will burn. This is "the wrath to come" of which John speaks to all who have ears to hear. John warns of judgment.

When I was a kid, I loved kickball. I wasn't any good, but I loved playing. At recess, I'd line up with everyone else around two captains and anxiously hope to be chosen. Thinking about judgment day reminds me of standing around hoping to be chosen, worrying I wouldn't be. When I read of sheep and goats being separated, I'm desperately hoping I'll make Team Sheep. When I read of bridesmaids with lamps trimmed and others who run out of oil, I'm praying I'm chosen for Team Light. And the thing is, there's only one team when God comes as judge. Because Jesus will burn everything left, the chaff, "with unquenchable fire." It's hard to hear our reading from Matthew this week without contemplating this image of fire and reflecting on its role in my future.

My reflections this week were aided immeasurably by Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, author, and theologian. "Throughout holy scripture," she observes, "fire is the one reliable sign of God's presence."²

² Ibid.

God appears to Moses in a burning bush, leads the Israelites through the wilderness as a pillar of fire, and descends as fire at Elijah's call to consume his offerings and defeat the prophets of Ba'al. It should not surprise us at all that fire will play a role in Jesus' coming again in power and great glory to judge the world. That's how God comes. And though fire can burn, maim, and even kill us, the fire of which John speaks is "God's own fire, the fire of God's presence, fire that wants to speak to us, guide us, instruct us, and save us." Tongues of God's fire appeared over the disciples at Pentecost, empowering them to share the good news of Jesus with the world. God's fire is not necessarily the fire of destruction. It can be the fire of refining, of melting for recasting, of transformation – indeed, transfiguration.

Reflecting on Godly fire, I realized that within me – within each of us – there is both wheat and chaff. Parts of me bear much fruit; others need pruning. Like a lump of ore, I've got rocky bits and flecks of gold. Jesus knows this, knows which parts are wheat, fruit, and gold. Jesus sees deep within us through all the dross that's in his – in our – way. As the Psalmist says:

LORD, you have searched me out and known me;
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.³

Taylor suggests God’s judgment is “all about being known like that, all the way down” to our innermost core, knowing all our dirty little secrets that bring us profound shame. For me, these include moments of intense pride, unbridled materialism, shameless gluttony, and compassionless neglect of others. Imagine she says, “standing before God without our armor, our masks, our possessions, our excuses, with nothing but our beating hearts and the slim volume of our life histories to commend us, waiting to hear God” speak truth of us – to us. Imagine God shining the light of Christ into all our darkness and igniting it with fire that cannot be extinguished until it has utterly burned away all the dross – until all that remains is the person God intended us to be – until we can, once again, stand before God naked and unashamed.

Does this mean we can sit back and wait for Jesus to return with this fire? I don’t recommend it and neither does John.

³ Ps 139.

This summer, we vacationed in Oregon. Route 101 runs down the coast, with ocean on one side and forest on the other. Every so often, we drove past a section of the forest that had been cut and cleared. Signs marked the year of the clearing. Oregon is diligent in maintaining its forests, following a schedule of prescribed clearing and burning. Fires are necessary to forest health, ensuring biodiversity and soil health. Unmaintained forests burn hotter and suffer more destruction, because accumulated detritus results in an overabundance of kindling on the forest floor. Oregon sacrifices small areas of trees on a regular schedule to preserve the forest as a whole.

This is what John calls forth from us. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Sacrifice the unfruitful aspects of your lives, he urges. Clear away the clutter, the baggage, the chaff. To repent is change one’s mind, one’s heart, one’s behavior for the sake of one’s soul. Welcome God’s fire into your life here and now in order to live as Christ’s disciples today. Last Saturday, I shared that I’m doing this work this Advent by reviewing the baptismal covenant and inviting God’s holy fire to burn away

all my disobedience to those promises. I invite you join me. You might spend time with Psalm 139, praying:

Search me out, O God, and know my heart;
try me and know my restless thoughts.
Look well whether there be any wickedness in me
and lead me in the way that is everlasting.

However you undertake this work this Advent, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Let us pray:

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.