

BAPTISM BY FIRE

Luke 3.15-22

January 13, 2019

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Lesson: Luke 3.15-22 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. John answered them all saying, “I am baptizing you in water, but someone is coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not fit to untie! This one will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. A winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff will be burnt in unquenchable fire.” Using exhortations like this, John proclaimed the Good News to the people. But Herod the tetrarch – whom John rebuked for his wickedness, including his relationship with his sister-in-law, Herodias – committed another crime by throwing John into prison. When all the people were baptized, Jesus also came to be baptized. And while Jesus was praying, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on the Anointed One in visible form, like a dove. A voice from heaven said, “You are my Own, my Beloved. On you my favor rests.”

Rod Romney’s “Create Us New”

We lift our hearts, we bring our lives

Just as we are, without disguise,

O Spirit come, create us new,

That we many walk in peace with you.

O holy flame of God that burns

Within each heart; and truly yearns

To claim each heart, and make it new,

That we may love ourselves in you.

O holy wind, now sow your seed,

Let new life grow to noble deed,

O Spirit com, create us new

That we make serve this world for you.

Here’s the good news.

You have already heard the sermon – if you have been paying attention.

It started with Harriet gathering us with the words of Debbie Perlman:

*Let us sing of our completions
Your hand hovers, blesses,
Bids us move to new beginnings.*

And how do we get to those new beginnings? In the words of Rod Romney:

*O holy flame of God that burns
Within each heart and truly yearns
To claim each heart and make it new.*

That's really the message of the lesson for today that Linda read for us from Luke 3. Anticipating the arrival of "the one" and the new day of God's reign, John says that the one who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So you heard the choir sing:

*Send down the fire of your justice ...
Teach us the fire of your truth ...
Give us hearts that feel
Give us hands that heal.*

So you have already heard the sermon. That's the good news.

The *bad* news – or perhaps the challenging news - is that all this – the fire and the learning and the "winnowing" on the way to something new – is a *prayer*.

And you know what they say. Be careful what you pray for.

I heard someone this week say that they were praying for patience. And I thought: O no! Look out! Every time I have prayed for patience there

have been long lines and horrific traffic and all kinds of difficult people in my way.

Be careful what you pray for.

Having heard the sermon, all I have to say to you is really a question: Are you willing to pray this prayer about the flame of God?

*O holy flame of God that burns ... Create us new ...
That we may love ourselves in you.*

If you think you might be willing, there are two things you might consider.

The first is the flame part.

Joanna Harader, is a Mennonite pastor now. But she grew up among the kind of Baptists who read this text in Luke about “separating the wheat from the chaff” as sorting out the good people from the bad.”

This understanding has always been unsettling for me [she writes]. It’s the stuff of nightmares; a big, burly farmer-god throwing people into the air with a pitch-fork, then burning alive the ones that come back down into the wrong pile.

But if the winnowing is in fact an image of baptism, as suggested by John’s words, then it becomes at once more comforting and more disturbing. Comforting because nobody is being hurtled in the air or completely destroyed by fire. Disturbing because we all are being shaken up and partially destroyed by fire ... I suspect the baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire is actually ... about separating the good from the bad within ourselves. The Messiah will take all the stuff of our lives and toss it up into the air, allowing the Spirit wind to blow away the parts that get in the way of who God wants us to be.

Now I don’t know about parts of ourselves blowing away. But to pray for this flame of God is to invite into our lives that power that can melt away all our carefully crafted disguises. As Rod Romney says, “We lift our hearts, we bring our lives, just as we are, without disguise.”

To pray this flame part is to open ourselves to have our hearts broken so that, as the choir sings, they can feel. It's to have our illusions shattered so that we can use our hands to heal rather than to build prettier prisons.

By way of testimony, there are some fires burning in me right now and I wonder if you can relate.

What I want is for my life to be part of a new way of being together with all our different racial and ethnic identities. That's what I want. And what I get is fire – the fire that burns away at the edges of my own racism. It's that smoldering self-consciousness that makes me second-guess my perceptions and motivations. It's feeling the heat of discomfort when my easy assumptions about life are disoriented by other people's experience. It's the pressure to not settle for guilt but to give myself to a power that is always ready to start over.

It's about being new.

There are fires that I do not pray for but that are beginning to ignite something in me. It is those literal flames – the fires that have burned through British Columbia and Eastern Washington and all over California. They are the fires that are beginning to strip away our illusions about the resilience of the Earth and the impact of our standard of living.

I don't know how many of you watched the President's address this week where he was trying to justify his obsession with a wall on the southern border by invoking a national immigration emergency.

In responding to the President, one of the networks played part of a Fox News response in which the person being interviewed said, in effect, that he didn't think it was a good idea for the President to get his way by calling immigration a national emergency because what if a Democrat got into office and called climate change a national emergency because a few fish are dying?

I was dumbfounded. We are learning more and more that climate change *is* a national – an international – emergency in which dying fish is a disaster and a warning of disasters yet to come.

But let's be honest. What would happen if someone did declare a national emergency and our whole way of life had to change? What if the fires begin to burn off our cavalier way of dealing with climate change? What if everything had to become ... new?

And if you let me be completely honest, in the course of wanting to be not just a good pastor but a good person, there is a fire burning in me. It's a fire that is melting away my own myth of invincibility. There is something broken in me. I don't know exactly what it is but it's like these flames that keep flaring up inside me and I have been trying to tamp them down; to just go on; to say "fine" when you ask me how I'm doing.

Because the truth is, it feels like, if I just let whatever it is keep burning, it will burn everything down. And I'll have to start over.

I'll have to be new.

And however freeing that may sound, it is also terrifying.

We say sometimes that people are "playing with fire" by which we mean that they are doing something risky. Well, we aren't playing with fire but *praying for fire* is just as risky. It is to risk everything for the sake of something else.

And the something else is love.

*O holy flame of God that burns ... Create us new,
That we may love ourselves in you.*

The one you are waiting for, John says, is the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire – the one who wants to melt away all the disguises and all the illusions that keep you from being the truth you

are; the one who carries the deepest truth of all: You are God's own. You are a beloved one.

I admit that I am envious of those of you who seem intrinsically predisposed to a sense of positive self-worth. No matter what happens, you never seem to doubt how loved and how lovable you are.

I am not that person. I struggle to love myself. And I don't think I'm alone.

And it's not just that I want to be better at loving myself. To want to be part of a new way of living together is to learn to love myself in you. To care about this planet is to learn to love myself in you. To let whatever this fire is burn in me on the way to something new is to learn to love myself in you.

And so I do not take for granted that voice – wherever it comes from, heaven or standing right in front me or a whisper in my own heart – that says “you are God's own; you are a beloved one.”

I need to hear that voice even if I don't immediately believe it. I still need to hear it. “You are God's own; you are a beloved one.”

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

In fact, if you are willing, as we sing “Love Divine All Loves Excelling,” I invite you to come forward and light a candle as a prayer for the flame of God to re-ignite that love in you.

NOTES

Joanna Harader, “Living By The Word,” *Christian Century*, December 19, 2018, p. 20.

BLESSING

May you experience, Rob Bell says,
May you experience this vast,
expansive, infinite, indestructible love
that has been yours all along.
May you discover that this love is as wide

as the sky and as small as the cracks
in your heart no one else knows about.
And may you know
deep in your bones,
that love wins.