

The Unquenchable Fire

December 6, 2009
Matthew 3:1-12

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The Church calendar always brings us the Advent season before Christmas, and traditionally Advent features some time spent with John the Baptist. This John precedes the “advent” or appearance of Jesus in His public ministry with John’s cries to “Prepare ye the way of the Lord...” and his urgent call to repentance.

It seems as if maybe we deserve better in this church. Our two Advent candles are now peacefully lit and burning quietly away; thanks to Marilyn and our Faith Team the sanctuary is beautifully decorated for Christmas. We may already be sneaking forbidden thoughts of “Silent, Night, Holy Night...” and the glow of the candles when into our midst sneaks this scraggly, unkempt and ill-mannered John the Baptist. He dresses like a crazy man in a late night fantasy snoozer of a movie; eats grasshoppers like a losing contestant in a “Survival” episode. He has the bad manners to start shouting, right here at all of us, to “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near” now that Jesus is near; he threatens with axes and pitchforks and the “wrath to come” and trees getting chopped right down and thrown into the furnace of fire. Then he wraps it up with One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit separating the grain from the chaff—and into the unquenchable fire with the chaff.

It seems somehow unfair in a church like ours; we’re the people who turn the channel when this kind of talk comes up on the radio; we’re the ones who shudder and avert our eyes when we’re driving thru the Western desert and see a billboard shouting down at us to “Repent” because “Jesus Saves.” We’re the ones who may have quit churches that talk like that—misunderstand and misuse powerful images in order to scare and manipulate.

Since we can’t change the channel—John the Baptist turns up in all four gospels, which we promise to be studying regularly—and Jesus gave John His seal of approval (“None born of woman was finer than John the Baptist” [11:11]) we have to deal with him, ill manners and all.

Of all the scary stuff John shouts, I read about “the unquenchable fire,” and, bottom line, I wonder one thing: “How worried should we be?”

I Of those two groups of people John was addressing by the Jordan, the first and larger seemed to have nothing to worry about. These were the common people, who paradoxically came flocking to him and his no-holds-barred preaching about the need to repent.

Perhaps they longed to hear one who told them the truth about their deepest selves; perhaps they finally trusted one with no political ties or motives and they wanted to come clean. They “confessed their sins” there; that is, they came to agree with God’s truth and God’s verdict about them. John has no harsh words for these.

In contrast, the second group elicits his shocking rhetoric. They sure need to be worried. “Who invited you to crash this Party, whose guest list is only sinners? Who said you could come out and merely observe from afar when the door to the Dr.’s office is wide open and the Physician who wishes to make you well and whole is awaiting you?” You brood of vipers! Even now the axe is poised to chop down such barren trees as you people!

They (who have cause to be worried) happen to be the religious experts (Pharisees and Saducees.) They’ve walked all the way from Jerusalem to explore the commotion, but they certainly do not need to repent. Not like the rabble, the kind of common people who go in for fire and brimstone; these holy people are OK, thank you. They have no personal need of repentance since they are already standing tall before God by virtue of their own position and merit.

It looks like Heather and I are the two most likely candidates to fall into this category—we wear the robes—but I’m afraid nobody’s safe.

You will not be surprised to hear that high school athletes interested in evincing interest from college coaches are encouraged to go out and put together a “Personal Highlights DVD” (there are services who will put this together, for a hefty fee) and send it around for college coaches’ evaluation. It reminds me of the religious experts at whom John is thundering—but unfortunately it reminds me of myself, and perhaps each of us. We each pay attention our own mental “Personal Highlights DVD”; it’s part of being human. We would never act so conceited as to tell others about it, but we each have our own reasons for thinking we don’t really need to get serious and stay serious with God. We lapse; we know better; but still we live as if we are self-sufficient, as long as we can get away with it. We promise to repent, as long as the Spirit won’t ask us to do something we’d rather not; we promise to spend more time in prayer, when things calm down, and to get involved in a small group Bible study, when our schedule opens up. Nothing personal;

it's part of being human. Whatever we say we believe, the conclusion seems inescapable and our behavior belies the truth: we live as if we think we do not really need Jesus to save us.

God was not impressed with their holiness, nor with our Personal DVD or with whatever it may be which keeps us from relying upon Him. God does not need our medals or our trophies (or our "aw, shucks, I could never do that" defeatism)—God can raise up children of God to praise Him from the rocks on the ground! It is God who gives life and talents and capabilities; what impresses God is a life that bears good fruit; after all, fruit exists to nurture others. A tree has a purpose, our lives have a purpose. John is saying those counting on their psychic DVD of accomplishments (or laments and excuses) rather than their good fruit pleasing to God, and their ready thanksgiving to God, are about to get chopped down any day now.

Should we be worried? Only if we insist on moving over into that second crowd—the spiritual window shoppers, those too pleased and self-sufficient to confess our sin and allow God to make us whole; to give us His kind of life.

II The first half of John's rant is aimed at those two groups on the shores of the Jordan, that day in maybe April of 27 A.D. But he's only just getting warmed up! Next he turns to the future: "One is going to be coming, far more powerful than I. I baptize with water, for repentance, to get ready for the real thing: for Him and His baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire!"

If we need any reminding that the babe in the manger born in Bethlehem grew up, John tries to oblige: "This more powerful One is coming, his pitchfork in hand, and He will clear the threshing floor and separate the wheat from the chaff—into the barn with the wheat and into the unquenchable fire with the chaff!" (Us non-farmers may need translation: the outer husk or chaff and the edible grain were all together on the floor; during the breezy days of the harvest season the farmer would throw them all up high into the air with the winnowing fork; the heavier grain would fall back down and the dried up lighter husk would be carried off in the wind.)

When I was a boy growing up in Palo Alto, about this time of year our parents would take us out each year to watch the bonfire which was lit in the dry lake bed of Lake Lagunita the night before the Big Game between Stanford and Cal. It was a big highlight. To a child the crude wooden structure looked like the tower of Babel; in actuality it was probably 40' wide and 20' tall—old railroad ties, odd remnants of lumber, bits of all kinds of wood. (I'm sure it was all purchased fair and square.

I still remember the creosote smell of the railroad ties.) And I still remember how hot that fire felt once it got going—you couldn't stand closer than maybe 20", and even then you'd feel burned on the front and freezing on the backside after a minute or two.

This brings up maybe the most scary of John the Baptist's images: that "unquenchable fire." Are these the flames of eternal torment? How worried should we be? We know fire can represent several things in the Bible: yes, fire can be destructive. And fire can symbolize our own separation from God and the "crash and burn" quality of our own lives lived in our own ways. Fire can represent purification and transformation; fire can symbolize the presence of God.

Think of Moses and the burning bush. His life took a very different turn from that day forth as he responded to the call of God and the presence of God. Or think of Moses atop Mt Sinai, communing with God before coming down with the tablets, the Law. The people thought he would be consumed up there by the fire. God was especially present; Moses' face glowed for days afterward. Moses was never the same.

Jesus is said to "baptize with fire." [v 11] It is obscene to think of Jesus baptizing a baby with fire; Jesus baptizes babies and everyone else into life, not death. The fire represents transformation. The way the Potter uses fire to transform the clay; the way the goldsmith uses fire to transform the ore into worthless dross and pure gold. The way God desires to transform the baby, and each of us, to conform eventually into the image of Christ.

Fire can also represent destruction, no question. Some things need to be destroyed, deserve to be destroyed. In John's image, the husk has already served its purpose (like the husk protecting the ear of corn.) It's already dried out, brown, dead. The wheat is still vital; it can feed people and fulfill its purpose. It is alive, and worth storing and saving. The fire does not kill the chaff; the fire does not separate the living from the dead. It destroys what is already useless and dead. In this case, the fire reveals what has already happened.

In this light I am glad the fire is unquenchable. There is always something within us that is unholy and unworthy—that cannot come with us into eternity. (Not only our "gold" or our accomplishments—also our character flaws and patterns and habits and attitudes and obsessions.) I do not always act or live as if God is God, as if God is the priority around which each of my other priorities revolves. If the next realm is going to be any better than this one, it must be that a lot of what causes chaos and misery down here will need to get purified away. Who wants to live

forever with a next door neighbor who will be as irritating as some of the ones we have down here already? Who will want to live with me forever, unless God first does some big-time refinement? (How will the Kingdom ever be very different, if its citizens keep going their own way like sheep, and do not submit to the rightful King?) Our attitude of self-sufficiency, of not truly needing God first, will need to be transformed. I don't need to say a word: the actions of my life and the fruit that I bear speak for themselves before God.

(I hesitate to state the obvious: the fire of transformation is our friend in this lifetime too. Those very traits which will not be welcome in heaven are the same which cause me grief in this world; to be truly free to respond to God in gratitude brings strength and courage and focus in any realm. At this point I also state my indebtedness to Barbara Brown Taylor for some of these images in a sermon of hers.)

Should we be worried? Not as long as the unquenchable fire is God's fire. In the hands of the One who baptizes with the Spirit and with fire, fire is not killing what is alive—it's getting rid of, and clearing away, what's already dead.

III This brings us to the end of John's mini-sermon. He spoke to the two sections of the crowd at the Jordan; those confessing their sins and those who apparently thought themselves above such a thing. He spoke of the One who was to come in the future.

There's one thing left to notice. John got some of this wrong—there on the Jordan he had never met the One who was to come, Jesus the Savior. By the Holy Spirit—and by the Scriptures, and by the faithful who have gone before us, we recognize the One born of Mary at Bethlehem, the Word made flesh, the Great Physician who freely gave His life that we might be made whole—we recognize Jesus better than John did.

John could not believe the More Powerful One would turn out to be so merciful, so forgiving. Later John the Baptist, in prison, sent a messenger to ask the Christ—"is it really You? I was expecting someone different—a Messiah a lot tougher." Jesus responded with a catalogue of the good fruit He had borne: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at Me." (For all John's bluster about the unquenchable fire, this is a remarkably low threshold which Jesus establishes: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at Me.") [11:6]

Don't worry; the Judge with the pitchfork in hand is the

One who has been with you every moment, thru every darkness and fire of your own making. Don't worry; God doesn't need from you an All-America Personal Accomplishment DVD; not a big bank account or fancy possessions or religious robes or even a great attitude or a clean conscience. In fact, none of our stuff or our record impresses God or makes it thru the unquenchable fire.

God is the Lord and Giver of life; God doesn't need a whole lot to work with. God can raise up children to praise Him out of the stones on the ground; out of a grain of sand on the beach or a grain of wheat or a kernel of corn.

All God needs is someone like you or me willing to be made whole; by the mercy of God, someone willing to be made fully and forever alive in Jesus the Christ, the risen Lord.

Matthew 3:1-12

3:1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,

6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

9 Do not presume 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.

10 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.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."