

Grace Church 12-16-2018

Luke 3: 7-18

The Rev. Richard Jones

Someone is coming who is more powerful than I. He will clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Who does this announcement come from?

From John the Baptizer, the surprise son of old Elizabeth and Zechariah, a cousin of Jesus, son of Mary.

John behaved strangely. He wore rough clothes. He certainly used rough words:

“You vipers’ brood. You sons of snakes. You wonder if I’m the one sent by God to make everything right in this messed up world. No, there is one coming who is more powerful than I am. He is coming to bring retribution.

“Why? Because when you had two coats, you failed to share. You failed to share your surplus food. You have bullied. You have thought that who your family is made you special.

“So here’s what’s next: When He comes, He will be like ... a harvester threshing out the good wheat from the straw, separating the edible grains from the chaff. He will keep the wheat. But there will be a huge pile of chaff that will go out to be burned.”

Is this a good elevator speech? Is this indictment good news?

Can it be good news to be told that someone with cosmic power is coming to judge us, like a harvester evaluating his crop of wheat? How can it be good news to hear that after he finishes threshing the whole crop, after pounding out all that is edible and of value, he is left with a pile of straw and chaff that has to be consigned to the fire. “The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

You might like me to stop right here. Is this going to be a sermon about hellfire, about painful punishment after death for misdeeds committed in this life?

Maybe some Jews living under ruthless Roman occupation, or others tired of warned all their lives being warned against breaking God’s purity laws, or others craving a hero to rise up and restore the nation’s dignity – maybe that kind of audience would hear something in the Baptizer’s warnings they could call good.

But not us.

We are not living under occupation. We know we are not chaff. We know we are decent people, doing our best. We are willing to let God be God. Surely this threatening talk is just talk. Or, if this warning is serious, it must be meant for somebody else. Will God really burn the chaff? -- in a fire that never goes out?

There are fires. We don't much like to think about them, but there are fires. They break out when nobody expects.

In 2011 a fire broke out in the sacristy of the old chapel at Virginia Seminary and destroyed that place I loved.

In 2001 a fire broke out when an enemy crashed a passenger plane full of fuel into the Pentagon.

Fires break out in unoccupied houses -- and in homes for the elderly.

Forest fires last month destroyed not only forests but one entire town in California.

Volcanoes erupt. They remind us that our earth's core is fire.

There is reason to fear fire. Fire has power to destroy. If God had power to create us, why would he not have power to unmake us, by fire?

But fire can do more than destroy. Fire can also take solid matter and change it.

I remember as a boy travelling overnight by train from Washington to Chicago. In the middle of the night the train stopped in Pittsburgh. I lifted the windowshade and saw the blackness lit up by glowing orange furnaces. It was a steel factory. Fire takes iron ore and changes it to steel.

Prophets and poets of all kinds, when they try to describe how God works to shape us or to change us, often have painted word pictures from metallurgy:

God is like a refiner's fire. God will purify the unfaithful descendants of faithful Abraham.

Fire serves to assess the properties of material products-- highly combustible, flammable, fire-resistant, fireproof.

Why shouldn't fire be a test also of our accomplishments -- the products of our life?

Some of the accomplishments that earned us our social standing may turn out not to pass the fire test. Maybe the fire test will reveal that some of the accomplishments other people admire us for were actually chaff. Maybe only some random act of our kindness will survive the test.

Or maybe the fire will reveal a previously forgotten moment when we dared to speak an unwelcome truth. Maybe, once the chaff is burned off, the moment we chose the hard right over the easy wrong will shine.

We decent people don't dwell on the thought of God's anger. But isn't anger real? Don't we get hot under the collar when we are insulted? Don't we burn with rage when we are ignored or abused?

God of course is not some imaginary, magnified projection of ourselves. God is not subject to human emotions. God has no need to defend himself.

And yet God is like a refiner's fire. God is like a steelmaking furnace. God does assess us. God does seek to refine us. God does try to mold us. Fire is not a bad picture to help us imagine how God works to refine resistant matter -- including us.

God administers judgement by fire.

So fire can destroy. Fire can remake. Fire can also clear a place for something new.

Sugar cane fields are burned after the harvest.

Alabama peanut farmers burn the dry plants after the crop has been harvested. They use fire to destroy pests and disease before a new crop is planted in that field.

Forest fires create space where new trees can get the sunlight and nutrients they need to grow.

Roman engineers learned that even the chaff piling up in heaps on the threshing floor could be burned to heat your cold bathwater to warm.

The burning of the chaff may not be the end of the chaff.

In our personal lives, cancer may break out. Our aging brain can start to fail. We may lose the job which had given purpose and security to our life. Divorce may ravage a marriage.

All these fires that destroy and test us may also carry the potential for some new form of life.

Dementia may destroy some of our mental powers. At the same time, surrendering some of our adult competence, letting go of some of our obligations, can open up in some people a season of peace. Old friendships may revive; old grudges may be let go. Sometimes into a quieted space there comes the gift of peace.

During the past month, much has been said and much music has been performed to remind us of the terrible war that devastated Europe between 1914 and 1918. People called that devastation the Great War, or the World War, or later the First World War. That war left women outnumbering men in Europe; that war destroyed the Austrian and German empires; that war shredded the rules for warfare and for polite society which the Western World had built up over the centuries.

And yet, this same fire made it possible for Woodrow Wilson and the diplomats of his day to enunciate new principles for relations between nations: Self-determination. Respect for national sovereignty. Collective security, instead of each nation looking out only for itself.

It is true that the United States never committed itself to the League of Nations. The victors in the Great War proved more ready to punish than to restore their enemies. A Great Economic Depression sank many hopes.

But it was the devastation of that Great War that cleared the way for the idea of an inclusive forum of nations committed to promoting human wellbeing in this world. One hundred years after the 1918 armistice, despite new wars and new threats, United Nations agencies are still at work today. They verify nuclear arms-control agreements. They prevent malaria. They erect tents to keep homeless refugees alive.

That great fire gave rise to new forms of life.

So the people who came out to hear John were not wrong. To hear ourselves called chaff is an eyeopener. His warning is good.

God creates. God burns. God wants to renew us.

Thanks be to God.