

“Spirit, Fire, and Salvation”

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 16, 2018

Isaiah 12:2-6

*Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.*

*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day:
Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.*

*Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin 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. Even now the axe 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.’

And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Let us pray. Gracious God may your Holy Spirit thrive in our midst on this day. May we hear Your word with fresh eyes and with new vision and may we know Your grace and Your truth. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

When I was in seminary and I hate to admit it, but that was back in the 1960s, I decided to do an intern year in an innovative urban ministry inner-city project in East Harlem, the East Harlem district of New York City. And I have to say to you nothing in my life up to that point had prepared me for New York City and especially Harlem and East Harlem in

those days. Certainly not growing up in a small town in Northeastern Nevada, not my college years in Portland Oregon on a small somewhat idyllic campus, nor my first year in seminary which was, after all, in the San Francisco Bay Area, but none of it had really prepared me. New York City was a major culture shock, East Harlem even more so. And I think a lot of it was this--the level of poverty and of struggle in day to day existence that just characterized life in that place, it simply overwhelmed me and it shook my faith to its very foundations.

So when John the Baptist says in our scripture lesson today, that after him one will come who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And he later says that the chaff which is within us will be burned with unquenchable fire. Well, I can only say that's a lot of what that year was like, a baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire. And it was sometimes a tough year. It was as if the chaff of entitlement and privilege with which I had grown up and which I was not even aware of, it was as if that chaff had seeped into my very bones without me even being aware of it and that began to dawn on me that perhaps it needed to be burned away. Sometimes it felt like when I was in East Harlem that I was from that brood of vipers that John spoke of. It was a total transformation of my faith, a new understanding that following Jesus was more than simply saying that I was loved by God and somehow saved. That is important. Very important. Don't misunderstand me. But it was then that the awareness was also meant to include all of us. So that no one, especially these people living around me in East Harlem, no one was to be left behind in God's justice and compassion. And that it meant a clear call to me to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with my God. And here's the thing about advent, I'm sure you've noticed it's impossible to get through it without encountering John the Baptist once again. I often wish we could. Every year I think, "If we could just skip it, please. One year. Let's just skip all this stuff about John the Baptist. Let's get to the manger. Let's get right to the baby. Let's get to the animals and the shepherds and the Magi and Mary and Joseph. And let's for heaven sakes sing carols [laughter]."

But here we are. Once again, John the Baptist. And I don't know about you but his words make me uncomfortable. It reminds me that the one who comes does not offer to us cheap grace. No, it's costly my friends, it's costly. Because it opens up to transformation that we might not have been banking on. To transformation and to change. "You brood of vipers," he tells the crowd, "who told you to flee from the wrath that is to come?" and you can't really describe those words as diplomatic now can you? It's not a good Presbyterian minister. No. But he is still the forerunner of Jesus. The one, after all, who comes to us the Gospel of John reminds us as one who is full of Grace and full of Truth. So I thought a lot about this passage and this message of John. Perhaps the language does not necessarily belong in polite society but underneath it in the margins of he says it is finally a message of good news as the passage ends up with, of salvation if you will. Interesting that our Hebrew scripture this morning's all about salvation and our New Testament [laughter] reading is hmm, a little bit about judgement isn't it? He exhorts the crowd, "Do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our ancestor." In other words, do not think that because of the people you come from in the south, we ask, "Who's your momma?" And, "Who's your daddy?" It's an important question too. It's not so much the circumstances in which we grow up - not at all - or the education that you might have or the resources you might have at your disposal or the neighborhood in which you live, that makes it possible for you to be saved or loveable or a pathway of earning your way into the kingdom of God. The one who is coming after is going to baptize us with holy spirit and with fire.

And so take note, when Jesus encounters those in his society who have been designated as sinners and outcasts, such as Zacchaeus or the Samaritan woman at the well or the woman who is caught committing adultery. He treats them like he'd treat us. He treats them with dignity. And he invites them too, to come to the table to learn that they are also loved children of God. And it can be a journey that is not so easy. It may not have been so easy for Zacchaeus to hear those words. The woman caught committing adultery. The Samaritan woman at the well. Because I imagine that they learn to play those roles of inferiority and unworthiness very well. As we do sometimes. Very, very well. So that we believe we are less than. And it can be costly to root that out of us. But he also comes as one with truth. So when he encounters the religious leaders of his time, filled with prejudice and bigotry, and calls them hypocrites, when he encounters the rich young ruler in whom possessions have taken an unholy hand on him or when he encounters many others and says, "Forgive. Even 70 times 7, you are to forgive." He invites them and he invites us on this journey of the baptism of the holy spirit and of fire. It's costly grace. Because we realize that it isn't just for us. But it is for everyone. It is for the desperate migrant. It is for the frightened child who is detained and taken away from her parents. It is for the family in urban New York City. It is for the one who is struggling with opioid addiction in rural America. And, yes, it is too for families in Kirkwood, Missouri.

Some of you have heard me tell stories from the ministry to gang members in Los Angeles of Father Gregory Boyle.

Probably some of you wonder do you read anything else [laughter]? I'm here to tell you, "yes I do." But he has so many illustrative stories of living the Gospel that I feel I must tell you one more. And I can't promise I won't tell you even another one [laughter]. So bear with me. It was one night around 8:00p.m. and Father Boyle was coming out of his office. He was bone tired. He wanted to go home. He wanted to relax. You know the feeling. And wouldn't you know, as soon as he gets outside there's someone waiting for him--one of the gang members. Homies they call one another. His name is Willy. Willy's in his mid-20s. Frankly, he's a peripheral gang member at best. He's more anxious to regal you of exploits than to actually be involved in them. As Boyle describes him, he's a charmer. He's a kind of a conman. And now he encounters Boyle and says he needs some money. He needs some cash. He's hungry. And Boyle's just too tired to argue with him. So he tells him to get in the car, they'll go to the ATM. So Willy hops into the car and they drive to the nearest ATM. When he gets there he parks the car and he tells Willy to stay in the car, please. Because he doesn't want him encountering some rival gang member. He tells him to stay in the car, he'll be right back. Boyle no sooner gets out of the car when he hears a muffled, "Hey." It's Willy. And he's miming the keys. And then he's mouthing the word, "Radio." Boyle looks back at him and wags his finger and says, "No." And then mimes back to him, holding his hands together and with exaggeration, he mouths the word, "Pray." Well, Willy rolls his eyes but what's he going to do? He's putty in Father Boyle's hands so he assumes the praying stance and looks heavenward and Boyle proceeds on his quest to the ATM. But after about 10 yards he turns back around. He just wants to check on Willy and he sees Willy in the car, in the prayer position, seemingly praying. So he goes on to the ATM. Boyle returns to the car with cash in hand and gets in. And right away, he knows. He knows that something has happened. Willy is uncharacteristically quiet and reflective. He's usually just a jabber-box. But he's uncharacteristically quiet. And Boyle looks at him and says, "You prayed, didn't you?" Willy doesn't look up. He's still and quiet. And then he says, "Yes, I did." Boyle starts the car, asks him, "Well, what does God say to you?" "Well, first," he said, "shut up and listen." So Boyle says, "What did you do?" "Aw, come on Father G. What am I supposed to do? I shut up and listened." Boyle drives him home just completely struck by how quiet and humble Willy seems to be and finally says, "So, son, tell me something. How do you see God?" "God? He's got my back." "And God," Boyle asks, "How does God see you?"

Willy doesn't answer at first." Here's a young man who's heard all his life what a bad person he is. So Boyle turns and watches as Willy rests his head on the recliner and stares at the ceiling of the car. And he can see a tear falling down his cheek. His heart is full, his eyes overflowing. And he says, "God thinks I'm enough." He actually uses the word firme, F-I-R-M-E, which means to the homies, enough. You do not need to be one bit better. And Boyle ends by saying, "Not only does God think we're firme, it is God's joy for us to marinate in that." Baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. Yes, in part, that we are loved and cherished and precious in God's sight, and that we are gifted by God's spirit that we are enough. And sometimes that chafe of unworthiness and unlovableness that we have buried deep within needs to be rooted out, burned.

But so too on this journey, does that chafe, which keeps us one from another, those resentments and hates and prejudices, it builds walls and barriers between us, one group and another, one person and another. Chafe that helps us tolerate systemic injustice and exclusion, sometimes that too needs to be burned out. And most of the time with most of us it is a complex combination of all of it. But be assured that the one for whom we wait is indeed the one who is filled with grace and with truth. Amen.