

Advent Year C, Week 3 • December 12, 2021

Prayer for tending to God's presence

Good news proclamation

Advent reminds us the love of God arrives like a fire. And love loves unto purity and wholeness. All that is not beautiful in the beloved of God will be purified so that God might be at home in us, and we may fully be at home in God.

The theme for the third Sunday of Advent (as I mentioned) is joy. And in most of the Lectionary readings this morning, joy is evident.

Zephaniah 3:14-15: **SOUNDS LIKE JOY**

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!*

*Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

*15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.*

*The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.*

And Isaiah 12 **SOUNDS LIKE JOY**

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 And you will say in that day:

*Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.*

*5 Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.*

*6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

And certainly, Phil 4 **SOUNDS LIKE JOY**

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

But things seem to take a turn with our gospel passage. The passage sounds less joyful and more threatening, right. John speaks to the people coming to be baptized with strong words and what seems like a somber if not threatening tone.

7 “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 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. 9 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.” **Ax at the root, bear fruit, brood of vipers.**

And John continues:

*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 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**.*”

I’m noticing something here. I’m noticing that I perceive John’s words as less joyful than I do the other words. Yet, all the passages are finding fulfillment in Jesus. **Is Jesus threatening in the way I think on first look?**

It is Jesus, who is the Lord Zephaniah speaks of: *15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. (Zeph 3:15)*

And we are to *6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. Jesus is this Holy One of Is. 12:6.*

The Lord who is near in Phil 4, is Jesus, so rejoice! Again I say, rejoice!

And it is this same Jesus who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and **fire**.

We see this with joy in most cases but not so with the gospel text. I wonder why. Perhaps it is something in us? Or perhaps better said, what we think about when we think about these texts.

It’s like the joy of the first three readings turns into the pain of the gospel text.

But, I’d like to say that the joy and pain intersect rather than saying the readings take a turn.

This point of intersection, where joy and fear of pain may be held together at once, is all speaking of Jesus. And that may sound abstract or maybe poetic but I think it is important.

Because in Jesus pain and joy can be experienced at once without the need to minimize, downplay, or ignore either. We can speak of the incredible joy of rejoicing in the Lord being present and coming, while at the same time recognizing that in his arrival and healing of sin, is great pain as well.

I say this at the outset because I want to be careful to communicate that our pain and suffering, our doubt and confusion are all real and to be named and processed. And yet, is still joy in Jesus.

GN: The love of God arrives like a fire. And love loves unto purity and wholeness. All that is not beautiful in the beloved of God will be purified so that God might be at home in us, and we may fully be at home in God.

I believe that what I am about to submit to you from our Gospel text is some of the most important and life-giving news about the gospel that I could ever share. And I say this not because there's anything exceptional about how I'll say this, but because I am going to attempt to share a perspective that, if you've spent much time in the church, you may have never heard in church. Most western evangelical churches have a formation that focuses on fear to produce change. We are formed in fear and promote fear. It goes along with our culture.

Illust. -Advertising aims to get you to fear a problem you didn't know you had and offer you a solution you didn't think you needed. Social media often leads you to fear that you are missing out. And it has been said of many very conservative Christians that they fear that somewhere, at some time, someone is having fun. And that's not allowed.

But there are real things to be fearful of - carjacking and child abduction, violence, etc.

Our formation in fear influences how we see this passage. When we see the words "fire," we often think, "pain, punishment, destruction." That is the dominant narrative/story. So when we hear, "I baptize with water, He baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire," we may think about terror.

And there is some truth to that. **But what are we to fear and why?** I believe John is communicating here, and the actual reason we can rejoice in the coming of Jesus requires us to relate to both fear and fire differently.

Relevance:

When Jesus comes into our lives, he changes things. He calls for change. He warns us that our lives will have to change, our communities will have to change. The passage we're looking at continues from last week where John the Baptist says, 'Make those paths straight!' Not just roads for Jesus to walk on, but the paths in our hearts, in our lives, which he will walk to take his rightful place as King in us. Jesus wants to impact your home, workplace, neighborhood, in your communities, on this city. He does it by transforming our lives. Are we open to this?

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Textual anchors:

God Comes as Fire

John says that when Jesus comes, God comes as fire: *7 So he began speaking to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the **fire**.'*

Now that sounds scary and threatening. Probably because people who love the fire and brimstone love passages like this and share them in terrifying ways.

I'll come back to v.10 - 14 because John returns to this portrayal of God as fire in v.15 – 17: *15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, 'As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable fire**.'*

Is Fire God or Bad Here?

It depends on how we relate to the fire. It depends on our posture and our attitude.

Luke uses symmetry in his writings. He also wrote the book of Acts, which is about what the disciples did as Jesus empowered them with his Spirit. There is a symmetry between Luke's Gospel, which is about Jesus, and his book of Acts, which is about Jesus' disciples. One point of symmetry is the motif of fire. This is the first time fire is mentioned in Luke's Gospel.

The Spirit and fire. Do you remember the first time fire is mentioned in Acts? **In Acts 2, when the Spirit comes with fire.** The Spirit comes, and there appear to be flames of fire above the heads of each of the disciples. And what is happening is that the **Spirit is burning sin away from people** and **burning the presence of God into people**. So God's fire starts off as a good thing. Like fire melting metal so it can separate the gold from the dross, the trashy worthless impurities. You could receive it with joy and gladness because God is burning the sin away from you, with your consent, as He speaks to you through Jesus and empowers you to obey. Or, you could remain addicted to your sin, and try to hold on to what God wants to burn away. In that case, you would be identifying yourself with your sinfulness, the dross, the trashy metals, the impurity. And God will feel like a destroying fire instead of a refining fire.

Let's briefly see this in other parts of the scriptures.

What is the first time in the Bible fire appears? After the fall, when God sends Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden because He doesn't want them to eat from the tree of life in a fallen

state, because they'd make sin immortal. Human evil would be immortal. So God sends them out and places a **flaming sword outside the garden to prevent people from coming back in (Gen.3:24)**. That's the first time fire appears in the Bible. The idea is that **if people are going to come back into the garden, God has to burn something away from us, or cut something away from us.**

In the book of Revelation, Jesus appears **as a flaming sword**. He is portrayed in Revelation 1 as burning with fire, and with a sword coming out of his mouth, because he has burned something out of his own humanity, and wants to burn it out of us. And he cuts something away from us through his teaching, through his word. **So fire is good for us.** That's why God constantly describes Himself as a fire, or even appears as a fire.

God showed himself as the fire in the burning bush (Ex.3:1 - 5). Then God led Israel out of Egypt as a pillar of fire. Then **God came in fire on top of Mount Sinai and called Israel to come up to meet Him (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5).** Moses said "yes" and went up and met with God, and as a result, his face shone with light (Ex.34). God was cleansing Moses. **Isaiah experienced God like a burning coal that touched his lips (ouch!!!) and purified his speech (Isa.6).** Malachi said, **'He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.** He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver' (Mal.3:2 - 3). **Jesus came to perfect the purification: 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire'** (Mt.3:11; Lk.3:16).

Fire is not torture and punishment. Fire is for cleansing and healing. The removal of sin from our bodies so that we can be the Body of Christ.

GNP: The love of God arrives like a fire. And love loves unto purity and wholeness. All that is not beautiful in the beloved of God will be purified so that God might be at home in us and we may fully be at home in God.

So whether you receive God's purifying fire as **joy or torment depends on you.** Do you want to be purified? Do you want to see God's salvation as salvation from your sin? Or will you resist God, identify with your sin, and therefore feel like God is destroying you per se?

Last thing to share.

Therefore, What is Repentance? v.10 - 14

Well, that's the question that people wanted to ask John the Baptist. So in v.10 - 14, he spells it out. This is what repentance looks like. Let's start with your money. *10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, 'Then what shall we do?' 11 And he would answer and say to them, 'The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.' 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' 13 And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.' 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, 'And what about us, what shall we do?'*

And he said to them, 'Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.'

This is what it looks like to prepare to meet Jesus, prepare for his kingdom, and prepare for his presence in your life.

Three categories of people get very specific instructions that exemplify what Jesus will continue teaching. This is a sketch, and Jesus will fill it out.

The Crowds: v.10 - 11

The crowds are the general Jewish audience. To them, John reminds them to be generous. Sharing. Give clothing. Give food. There was probably more he said, but this is what Luke gives us. This is how you practically care about people. Your attitude towards money expresses your attitude towards other people and yourself. Now I want to be sure that we get the fact that John the Baptist is telling this to people who don't know Jesus yet. In other words, he's doing evangelism. He's telling this to non-Christians. Can you do justice work, and call people to Jesus from that? Yes!

Proclaiming and demonstrating what life is like in the kingdom of God. When people see and ask, tell them how and call them in.

The Tax Collectors: v.12 - 13 - You've heard this but to be certain...

The tax collectors are Jews who collected taxes for the Roman government. Rome was the European power; they made a colony of this Middle Eastern people. Why? For taxes. These unwanted conquerors took tax money from all over the Mediterranean world, including Israel, into Rome. Jewish tax collectors worked for the oppressors, for the system. The way tax collectors made money for themselves is by charging something over and above the taxes. Rome didn't care what they charged. They just backed these guys up. So tax collectors were hated by their own people. They were the sellouts. **So for tax collectors to do what John, and later Jesus, said means that they weren't making a salary. Instead of profiting from the system, tax collectors would have to absorb part of the injustice themselves.**

Now I'm always surprised when I read this because whether I admit it or not, the Christian culture we have in the U.S. is about my personal piety. Individual holiness and not communal peace and justice. I keep thinking the words on the page of my Bible are going to change: "John the Baptist told them to get out of that job. No compromise!" But if they did that, then what would happen? **Someone else would take their place.** And then they would do the tax extortion thing. And the community will suffer in the same way. So John the Baptist and Jesus told tax collectors to stay in their job and **make nothing for themselves.** At least that cut out the extra portion that Jewish people had to pay that wasn't tax but extortion from the tax collectors. Tax collectors would have to be fairly poor, and/or work a second job, and/or depend on the Jewish community for support, and most importantly, trust God for support. Maybe one day the Roman Empire would end. But until then, this was what Jesus declared for people who

lived and worked as tax collectors. Don't ever let anyone tell you that the New Testament doesn't understand structural injustice, because they are so personal. Jesus and the New Testament writers totally understand structural injustice. They are personal because persons live in structures.

The Soldiers: v.14

Your supervisor, your commanding officer, gave orders to extort money from the conquered people. Well, you need to put God first. And if you can't stand up to your supervisor, when he contradicts God, well then maybe you're not as strong as you thought.

Challenging words. But John isn't expecting people to change and be bringers of communal justice and peace on earth by their own power. They, and we, need the healing fire of God to purify us so that God may be in us and we may be in him. In him means his justice and peace in the world now.

Robert Jenson asks what makes final salvation in fact both final and salvation, and answers, "Precisely that we are set right with each other, that I have the joy of God's rebuke for my sin against my brothers and sisters, and the joy of seeing the repair of my injuries to them, at my cost".

That, it seems to me, is what it means to hope Christianly. That is where we may find joy this Advent.

Advent reminds us that the love of God arrives like a fire. And love loves unto purity and wholeness. All that is not beautiful in the beloved of God will be purified so that God might be at home in us, and we may fully be at home in God.

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

Let's be silent together and quietly listen to what the Spirit may be speaking to us about the good news that God is like fire.