

Advent 2, Year A, 2019

Welcome to week two of Advent. We light another candle on the Advent wreath almost like lighting candles on a special kind of birthday cake. Each week the excitement should be building and the anticipation growing. Advent is an exciting season full of hope. Which is why we have this wonderful reading from Matthew where John the Baptist comes running out of the wild like a mad man shouting at people and calling them a brood of vipers. That's the Christmas spirit! And judging. There's lots of judging in our Advent readings. That will certainly get us on the right track for having a jolly good Christmas! Thank God for the Bible!

But we are people of hope and all sorts of good things and this is supposed to be a season of joyful anticipation so let's step back and have a look at what's going on. I like to think of judging in scripture as the plumb line we read about in Amos. We often think in such a limited way about justice, usually in terms of criminal justice and having to balance the scales. But when we consider God we must consider the infinite and our place in it, and the implications that has for living. The notion of the plumb line is to have a guide for growing and building so that that things may grow or be built straight, that they might last and withstand the trials of life. Sometimes we do go off the path, we forget to allow the plumb line to guide us and then returning can be difficult. Perhaps not unlike realizing something has been constructed improperly and so we have to do work to repair the structure, sometimes even tearing it down to its foundations. But never to destroy it, rather to build it strong.

So often, people think of judging as accusatory. But to imagine God sitting on a cloud stroking a white beard and checking things off a list would say more about us than God. Perhaps the mention of fire can be helpful here. Scripture uses the idea of fire throughout. John the Baptist mentions it twice today in different ways. The first might be more like the story of Pentecost in Acts where tongues of fire rest on the disciples' heads and they run out proclaiming the good news after hiding away in fear. Jesus will baptize with this fire. We are baptized with this fire: the fire of the Holy Spirit. Then John uses a second kind of fire which he says will burn the chaff. Can there be two different kinds of fire? Is this a divine mystery we may only know when we sing with the angels in heaven? I believe not. Just as we create images of God to suit ourselves which may or may not be accurate, yet there is still only one God beyond our knowing, I would argue the fire scripture refers to is the same but it is our use of it or how it affects us.

If I am set alight with the fire of the Holy Spirit – wonderful. But if I am in need of getting back on track, that same fire acts as the refiner's fire which purifies my soul so that I can get set aright - that I can separate the wheat from the chaff and do away with what does not bring me life. This is repentance. Prophets like John the Baptist see that we all need to do away with the things that weigh us down in order to truly enter into the Kingdom of God. Repentance. What are the things keeping us this week from truly experiencing the joys of the kingdom? A lack of generosity? Strict adherence to an idea or philosophy? The inability to forgive or seek forgiveness? What is the chaff we must burn in the unquenchable fire?

If we consider this question it can become apparent pretty quickly that the fire of God, the justice of God can be quite painful. Almost intolerable. But as we sing in a wonderful hymn 'How Firm a Foundation Ye Saints of the Lord': *When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie, my grace,*

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*all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee: I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.* This is a poetic way of exploring the idea of fire and the trials of life which shape and form us. The pain of this fire can be the intentional times we decide to repent. But it will never consume us, instead it will make us free.

This is something we see mentioned in Isaiah today. The passage is used by Christians to explain the notion of Jesus as the Messiah. The shoot from the stump of Jesse goes back to the story of Ruth who is the grandmother of Jesse. You might want to read the book of Ruth when you get a chance. It's reminiscent of many stories in scripture where there seems to be no hope, but God brings something incredible out of nothing. Moving to the gospel of Matthew it begins with a genealogy not unlike the kind we find throughout the Old Testament. The genealogy shows Jesus to be from the line of Jesse which fulfills the prophecy we read about in Isaiah. And let's look at this one who fulfills this prophecy. At the time of his arrival the world will be transformed so thoroughly that even a child can play with poisonous snakes in safety. And how will this be accomplished? Not through brute force or a violent overthrow but through righteous rule. Like the line which says: *with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.* Which brings us back to the fire.

What is it to have someone show us when we have gone off course? Why do we feel regret or guilt? How bad is it to know we have let someone down when we truly care about them? Isn't this an all-consuming fire? Isn't this a pain too much to bear? How many of us would rather wrestle a lion or climb the highest mountain instead of facing the truth about ourselves? And then, to change? No thank you. But maybe we can return to our hymn to find an answer here because we have to repent; we have to walk through the fire, at least occasionally, sometimes every day. And the conclusion of the hymn may be the most poignant: *The soul that to Jesus hath fled for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes; that soul though all hell shall endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

The promise of baptism is that we will never walk alone – neither in this life nor the next. The promise of baptism is that we may walk through fire but we cannot be burned because we are animated by fire. As Rowan Williams says in Being Christian: *So the baptized life is a life that gives us the resource and strength to ask awkward but necessary questions of one another and of our world. It is a life that looks towards reconciliation, building bridges, repairing shattered relationships. It is a life that looks towards justice and liberty, the liberty to work together to make human life in society some kind of reflection of the wisdom and order and justice of God.*

The justice of God. That's the life we signed up for: burn the chaff and feed the world the bread of heaven.