

Fire!

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2021
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" - Luke 3:1-6

Fire!

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I was six years old when I shouted those words, as I crossed an open field, holding two small glasses of water and running towards a fire that my brother Mark and I had set in a grove of trees, using a pack of matches that we had found there. Two small glasses of water might have contained the fire when I ran to our home. But by the time I returned, the whole grove was ablaze. Over the crackle and whoosh of the biggest fire I'd ever seen, I could hear the siren of the fire engine making its way through the neighborhood.

Whenever the story of the fire is recalled in my family, even all these years later, one or another of my brothers will smirk and say, "Do you remember those two glasses of water?" And everyone will have a good laugh on me.

But sometimes I am there again, aghast at the blaze, not when I am with family, but reliving the fire, and how it started, and how I responded *then* when I am in times of moral or spiritual crisis *now*, when I have mistakenly imagined that I can play with matches and keep the situation under control. And then when the fire is *out* of control, I extend my denial and add to the damage by thinking I can contain it with two little glasses of water when in fact all will be lost if the fire department does not show up soon.

The prophets of old who annually visit us in Advent often seem to be shouting, "Fire! Fire!" Every year on this Second Sunday of Advent John the Baptist lures us into the unexamined wilderness of our lives. He implores us to undergo 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' He is pulling the fire alarm, first on those who first went out to him, and then on us. Later in this same chapter and scene, John heralds One who will come after him and whose baptism will be 'with the Holy Spirit and fire' (3:16), and later in the scene, John cautions that '... the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' (3:17)

John's annual prophecy is so familiar to so many of us that it can become just another comfy feature in our holiday traditions. We blithely hum of figgy pudding and mistletoe ... and of John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We no longer hear the wake-up call. He no longer threatens our defenses as he intends. John smells smoke! And he wonders why so many of us go about our crazy-busy lives as if there is no fire.

But most or all of us do have at least a bit of the arsonist in us – don't we? We set fires that do damage to ourselves or others. We mistakenly believe that two little glasses of water should be equal to the blazes we have set. We minimize the damage. We blame others. We don't want to be flooded with shame. We don't want to think of ourselves, and we don't want others to think of us, as fools who play with fire.

Prophets often shout 'Fire!' in the context of individual transgressions and hubris and denial. A prime example in the Bible is the stunning take-down of King David by the prophet Nathan: "*You are the man!*" (2 Samuel 12:7) The prophecy of John the Baptist may strike a match in any one of us with regard to works of righteousness, forgiveness or love that remain untried, unfinished or wrecked and off in the shadows of our self-narratives.

Beyond the individual reckoning, however, the author of the Gospel of Luke clearly and uniquely imagines that the prophecy of John is also meant for communities, cultures and nations. Matthew and Mark tell us that John was '*clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist.*' (Matt. 3:4, Mark 3:6) Luke skips this detail but uniquely wants us to see John and his mission in the context of the worldly powers and religious authorities of the time – specifically: '*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.*' By naming and combining both the worldly and the religious contexts, Luke may have been provoking attention to the frequently disturbing complicity between the two. Here and throughout his gospel, he will constantly drag us into the murky and troublesome terrain between us and them, the powerful and the powerless, in stories such as those we now call the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Pharisee and the tax collector.

As Luke sees it, we cannot rightly understand, take to heart or respond to either the prophecy of John or the saving work of the One who comes after him without examining our collective sins of society, our racial and cultural and religious and gender profiling, our pretenses that we've pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps when in fact we've so benefitted from and been protected by the updraft of our privilege.

Or maybe we mainly know the ways of the world as one of 'them.' No amount of brilliance, hard work and integrity will advance us or protect us from people and systems designed to diminish us and keep us on the outside. A New Testament scholar named Mark Strauss calls the Gospel of Luke *The Gospel of the Savior for Lost People Everywhere*. And John the Baptist pulls the fire alarm on all of this: "... *the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*"

But how many of us naturally and readily take responsibility for sins and failures, whether individual or collective? We are often unable to see or face or do anything about them until a prophet comes along – or, I should say, the right prophet, the true prophet. Scripture repeatedly cautions that the world and the religious marketplace are filled with false prophets, some of whom have impressive credentials and large followings and who often and convincingly shout 'Fire!' You'll know the false prophet if his or her message leaves you incarcerated in shame. The message of a true prophet may well lead to our compunction and will require an honest reckoning. But the true prophet will also speak the truth in love. Wherever possible, the true prophet will show us a liberating and empowering way forward in hope, even joy.

Maybe you heard the two-fold response to the prophets in today's Collect as we prayed, '*Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins ...*' But wait! There's more! "... *that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.*"

On the day of the fire when I was six years old, I felt both relieved and terrified when the fire engine came into view. I believe one of the first true prophets I ever met stepped out of that fire truck. He was the fire chief, and as his crew subdued the blaze he took my brother and me aside. *“What were you thinking?”* he asked. *“Can’t you see how you put yourselves and others in danger? If I sound angry, it’s because my job is to keep you and your families and all of us safe. I hate to think of the even greater damage if your fire had kept burning out of control.”*