

Fire

All Saints Day, November 1, 2020
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. Luke 6:20-26

Henri Poilevey and I recently spent some time here in the church, preparing for his baptism this morning. We visited the baptismal font out in the narthex, and I told Henri about a drama from Ascension's early years—October of 1871 to be exact:

"Flames crossed the Chicago River at about 4:00 A.M. on the morning of [October 10] and reached the Ascension by 7:00 P.M. When the church caught fire Canon [Charles] Dorset [the rector] and several parishioners left their own possessions to burn in order to save what they could from the church. They rolled the stone baptismal font out onto LaSalle Avenue where it was found after the fire

"Ascension suffered the worst effects of the fire of any Episcopal parish in the city. The wooden church was completely consumed by flames in a few minutes. Apart from the font and communion vessels, nothing was saved"¹

Henri was given a shorter version of that story, but his imagination seemed to have been stirred. He asked me, "Can we use that font for my baptism?" Regrettably, I've been unable to learn if the font that survived the Great Chicago Fire is the large one in the narthex, or maybe this smaller one up in the Sanctuary that we will use this morning, or some other. But Henri's question seemed both poignant and theologically astute.

Fire breaks out or is mentioned in the Bible nearly 650 times. We may be most familiar with invocations of the fires of hell that signify God's righteous and eternal judgment – giving rise to countless *New Yorker* cartoons and often, as well, to religion driven by fear and shame. These associations with fire in the Bible are indeed many.

But fire in the Bible can also be more positively redemptive. Consider the very first mention of fire: when God promises Abram a divinely inherited land and offspring as countless as the stars. And Abram saw "a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch" passing through the sacrifice of animals he had prepared at God's command. (Gen. 15:17)

When Isaiah is undone by a vision in the Temple, a six-winged seraph flies to him, "holding a live coal ... taken from the altar ... The seraph touched my mouth with [the fiery coal] and said: '... your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' (Isaiah 6:6,7b)

John the Baptist proclaimed, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:16)

Jesus once said of himself, “*I came to bring fire to the earth ...*” (Luke 12:49). That fire came, in part, after his death, resurrection and ascension. His followers had all gathered in one place in Jerusalem when, “*Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue [of fire] rested on each of them.*” (Acts 2:1,3)

I did not invoke these biblical fires when I met with Henri about his baptism, nor when I mentioned the Great Chicago Fire. But you can see why his question caught my attention and stuck with me: *Can we use that font – the one that survived the fire – for my baptism?*

Henry’s question also led me to contemplate, without going into detail here, some of the singular fires that have already marked Henri’s own story. And looking out over your masks and faces now, and recalling so many others not here with us, we may for a moment consider the countless instances and effects of fires. Fires have come as personal losses or crises of faith, or as persecution or being diminished based on belief or gender or race. Fires accompany the rise and fall of empires, economies and ideologies, pandemics, wars, the vicissitudes of elections. Fires have consumed. Fires have purified.

We rarely choose fire. But some fires are later recognized for making new life possible. Some fires reveal unique gifts and callings that otherwise remain dormant, hidden.

Consider the counsel offered by the Apostle Peter in his first epistle. He addresses those who “*have had to suffer various trials ... [T]he genuineness of your faith,*” he writes, “*is more precious than gold ... tested by fire [and will] result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*” (1 Peter 1:6b-7)

Jesus does not mention fire in today’s version of the Beatitudes from Luke, but he may well have seen the aftermath of fires as he looks out over all who have gathered and as he commends and blesses “*you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God ... you who are hungry now, for you will be filled ... you who weep now, for you will laugh ... you who are [hated, excluded, reviled and defamed now] for surely your reward is great in heaven.*”

The verses immediately prior to the appointed gospel text tell of ‘*...a great multitude ... They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*’ (Luke 6:17-19)

Altogether, those souls and this scene may anticipate for us the Communion of Saints whom we recall and celebrate today, those who, in words from Revelation, ‘*have come out of the great ordeal.*’ Saints typically know of the fires of faith and life. They know the earthly sorrows and losses of fire, and they know the blessings when fire is divinely appointed.

Henri, we don’t know whether or not the font in which you are soon to be baptized is *the font that survived the Great Chicago Fire*. But it is a font, like so many others, in so many times and places, where multitudes have come and been baptized into a Way that has been, and will continue to be, tested and purified by fire.

We now invite you, as we have been invited through baptism, to find your way in the name of the One who baptizes with fire and to learn and show your unique gifts and calling, among all the Communion of Saints. Amen.

¹ Giles, George C., Jr., *History of the Church of the Ascension, Chicago, Illinois 1857-1982*, North Plains Press, 1984, pp. 4-5.