

## *Two little glasses of water*

The Third Sunday of Advent, 2018

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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

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

- Zephaniah 3:14b-15a

*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 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." 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. – Luke 3:7-18*

When I was only five or six years old, my brother Mark and I set fire to a large, beautiful bamboo grove next to our home in Southern California.

We had found a pack of matches—the good ones from the country club ...

Bamboo groves have the best tinder ...

It was an accident of course.

We were only experimenting.

The fire quickly grew out of control. I ran alone back to our house to alert the parents. Before returning to the scene of the crime, I went to the kitchen. There, I filled two eight-ounce glasses with water. By the time I returned, the whole scene was an inferno. My two little glasses of water were clearly useless. Soon we heard the sirens of approaching fire engines. We no doubt felt both terror and relief.

Over the years, my family members have made sure that I don't forget those two little glasses of water. "Nice try, guy!" But I also remember that inferno and my response to it when I'm in serious moral or spiritual crisis, when I underestimate what's at stake or what remedy is needed when my life is going up in flames, or when a blaze that I've started begins to engulf others around me. I skirt the issue. I want an easy way out. I put a dollar in the plate, knowing that God asks more of me and that I have more to give.

And by the way: How's your fire containment? Have you ever sent a Hallmark card when it was clear that you needed to ask for forgiveness and a personal visit was in order? Have you ever chosen to just sit and sip your water as others do all of the heavy lifting, or nodded consent when your voice may have made a difference but you didn't want to be seen as the uptight conservative or the whining liberal?

Sometimes I feel as if I am at the head of a procession with two little glasses of water here at Ascension. We can all smell the smoke from various ways that we've failed one another and fallen short of the Body of Christ or failed to address our looming issues, some already burning. In response, we sometimes wonder how to chant *'smelling smoke'* in Latin. Or we dismissively invoke Ascension's grand legacy, thinking we are immune from difficult change. "Yes, I feel the heat. But we're fireproof, you know?"

Some of you, I know, are expert fire fighters. You regularly rush in to put out blazes. And some of you are wearying, knowing that the blaze will only erupt somewhere else tomorrow while the underlying causes aren't being addressed.

Whether in our personal lives or in our common life in the church or in culture, sometimes we are in need of a prophet. Prophets can smell smoke before the rest of us. They see the nature and extent of the blazes in our lives and name them so that God can begin the needed intervention and repair.

*"Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, you're your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us ..."*

[The Collect for the Third Sunday of Advent, BCP p. 212]

Prophets summon us to be holy people who do not underestimate the commandments of love and justice. Prophets wave their arms and urge us to show up in the time of trial with huge, death-defying expressions of love, forgiveness, courage, humility.

The prophet's arrival can sound like the siren of an approaching fire engine. In the midst of some infernos that siren can sound like hope. *"Help is on the way!"* A seer like Zephaniah comes along and says, *'Rejoice and exult with all your heart! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.'*

The same siren may result in our dread, especially if we were the ones who started the fire and we thought we could put it out with two little glasses of water. The prophet has seen right through us and may sound downright vulgar when confronting us: *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"*

John the Baptist may have been particularly aiming at those who were momentarily caught up in his religious revival but were clueless about what was broken or on fire. They had no sincere intention to amend their lives. They had their 'JOHN THE BAPTIST DESERT EXPERIENCE' Tee-shirts. But their hearts will still largely be barricaded and self-serving. John seeks by his strident message to penetrate their complacency, their fear, their resistance.

Some of you may have noticed that the directions that John gives to others in the middle of this scene seem mild by comparison with his opening angry invective. He starts with *"you brood of vipers!"* to command attention and expose the crowd's half-hearted intentions. But when he is asked, three times, *"What shall we do?"* his counsel seems quite ... attainable.

*Share with others who don't have enough, especially if you have enough yourself.*

*Do your work with integrity.*

*Whatever power you have, don't abuse it. Use it for the common good.*

My daughter Grace recently taught me a relationship-building technique called '*30 seconds of courage.*' When you feel paralyzed by a huge challenge, break it down into smaller pieces. Then, courageously embody, in your words and actions and for just 30 seconds, the best outcome you can envision. Often your 30 second effort builds momentum, gets others on board and leads to positive outcomes, better than we may have ever imagined. I wonder if in part that is how John the Baptist is coaching those who come to him in today's gospel scene:

*Wherever you can, recover and stick to the basics, and choose the good.*

With regard to some of the blazes in our lives, 30 seconds of courage won't get the whole job done. Two little glasses of water won't be enough for full containment. But the counsel of John in response to his inquirers leads me to wonder if there are more instances than we know where two little glasses of water may at least be a good faith start.

*"And we, what shall we do?"*