

“The Unquenchable Fire!”

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Scriptures: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Luck 3: 15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 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. 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." 21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon:

And then along came John; unkempt, uncouth, unbathed, and uncut - hair that is! Fiery, bold, and untamed, he strode out of the wilderness - the original vegetarian wild child eating only locusts and wild honey! A wild man with wild hair and wild eyes - a genuine religious lunatic, wearing an itchy, hairy coat (maybe that's what made him so uncomfortable to have around?)!

John was a prophet and a preacher who preached fire and damnation! And as a prophet he was pained with an uncomfortable awareness, the knowledge of the imminent demise of the world, unless things drastically changed!

He also knew that an unquenchable fire existed! A fire that would consume not only the false religions of his time but maybe even himself if he failed to proclaim the truth?!

For you see, I do believe, that he believed, that his world was literally coming to an end and soon. Change was a comin' ushered in on the winds by the chosen one of Creator God, who was even more holy and stronger than he.

The words of James Baldwin in a collection of essays on race, *The Fire Next Time!* seem to apply here, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, fire next time!"

But John also wanted to be patently and impatiently clear- "do not place your hopes in me, because my baptism is only water and it is only preparatory meant for repentance! Repent so that, that truly anointed one of God can send the Holy Spirit and baptize you with fire - the real power that can transform your life!" So, get wet, get into the water, and repent for the fire will not destroy you but transform you!

Fire is both fearful and wonderful. And an unquenchable fire is, well... likely beyond our comprehension? A fire that cannot be put out no matter what! An insatiable fire that comes from the splitting atoms or like the fire between impassioned lovers? The power similar to that love of a parent for their child! Or like that fire which burned in the hearts of those who walked on the road with Jesus to Emmaus.

Or maybe it is the same fire that consumed those water-soaked bulls of Elijah on Mt Carmel! A fire so thirsty it lapped up every single drop of moisture that filled the ditch dug around the altar. The fire from a bush that burned brightly but which was never consumed! And maybe it is the same fire that burned bright one night

leading weary travelers from afar to find a simple stable. A fire that not so much later burned brightly from an empty tomb!

It is the same fire that also burned in the lives of folks like Peter and Paul, Priscilla, Chloe, and Lois! And the same fire that did not go out, but ignited the passions in the hearts of folks like Sojourner Truth, MLK, Gandhi and our recently departed Archbishop Desmond Tutu - just to name a few.

And I would certainly be remiss as a Mennonite preacher if I failed to mention our own Anabaptist martyrs, whose burning desire to follow Jesus no matter the cost led them to be burned to death at the stakes of medieval Europe!

But the fire of justice has never been quenched and will never be quenched as long as it still burns in the hearts of all who yearn for peace and who work for justice! It is a fire that is mesmerizing, amazing, awe inspiring, and all-consuming . . . so nothing can escape its heat. And those who get too close will surely get burned!

So, let us be clear - this fire that God sends will burn away parts of us; even some things that we may now hold very close and dear! The flame is hot and even painful sometimes, like the refiner's fire necessary to purify gold! For the fire that is sent from on high seeks to burn away all that keeps us from fully experiencing the love of our Creator. The fire is love and the Fire is hope because in that fire is our salvation! It does not destroy what is good but instead leads to our perfection, by igniting our hearts with the flame of God's love!

Now chaff does serve a purpose and for purposes of clarification, chaff and straw, though often used synonymously, are not one and the same thing. Straw is the dried stem and leaves of the plant. Chaff is that which once encapsulated and protected the kernel (what in lay terms we call the "beard and hull"). As the plant grew and the grain developed, it served a purpose. But when the harvest is over, chaff is pretty worthless. We certainly do not want any of it getting into our baking flour. Chaff is not only nutritionally worthless, it also can end up getting caught in our teeth, or in our throat where we must hack and cough to get it out! So, it is not suitable to feed livestock and it is itchy so also not good for bedding.

And in my personal experience, it seemed that chaff's only purpose, was to get into my clothes or go down my neck as I rode the combine during all those Kansas wheat harvests. Mixed with sweat it was one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my life - perhaps similar to wearing a coarse hairy shirt?

And so, if you were to ignite a large pile of chaff, it would burn fast and it will burn hot! And Jesus, according to John, will bring the heat!

His baptism of fire can burn away all that is false in our world, all that is unnecessary, and all that has become a barrier that keeps us far, far away from a loving God! A transformation that will burn away our fears, and our moments of despair and hopelessness, clearing the way for trust, hope, and God's love! But it is scary – after all, a seemingly uncontrolled fire that can't be put out should be scary.

But burning away all the worthless stuff that keeps me from loving others or from loving myself - must happen, even if I do come out of it singed and sooty in the process. The unquenchable fire that Jesus possessed consumed him! It compelled him to preach love and forgiveness, good news to the poor and release for the prisoners and to heal those who knew they were sick and so sought him out. It was the same fire that led him to make the ultimate sacrifice of love for us all - a serious and consequential baptism to be sure.

This, my brothers and sisters, this baptism of fire is one powerful baptism. And it is power that is available to us right now, right here - today!

So, catch afire! Seek it and then stoke it! Allow it to burn to empower and animate your life! For this fire that the Holy Chosen One brings will never go out - not today, not tomorrow, or next week, or even next year! It will burn, burn within you for all eternity! As it also burns throughout the entire world until that day when all is finally made right!

So, burn baby, burn!

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