
Children of the Fire

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

A Sermon Preached by Luke A. Powery at Duke Chapel on January 13, 2013

It is common knowledge these days that the shift of the world's Christian population has moved from the "north" to the global South. A critical reason for this shift has been the tremendous growth of Pentecostal communities worldwide, which has caused retired Harvard Divinity School professor, Harvey Cox, to declare that we live in "an age of the Spirit." The majority of Christian churches in sub-Saharan Africa and numerous parts of Asia are Pentecostal. The largest Christian congregation in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, is in Seoul, Korea, which claims eight hundred thousand members. Grassroots Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Latin America are also on the rise. Cox refers to this rapid growth as "a forest fire that continues to smolder just below the surface...and constantly breaks through the barriers that have sought to dampen it."

While growing up within Pentecostalism, there was a lot of talk about fire and in particular "the fire of the Holy Ghost" as expressed primarily in the worship experience. Writer James Baldwin's father was a Pentecostal preacher and in his essay, "Down at the Cross, a Letter from a Region of My Mind" in his book titled, *The Fire Next Time*, he describes the worship experience in his father's church. He writes, "I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, ... to "rock.""" Dare I say this morning as dean of the chapel at a prestigious university, that I have seen a rocking church, that I have seen it rock and roll to the rhythm of the Spirit in ways that are not easy to describe to children of the Enlightenment. One could call this ecclesial "rock" a sonic and somatic theological epistemology. But one may simply call it, as many do, a fire.

When speaking of fires, it is not just the Pentecostal kind. And it is not just about a warm-fuzzy feeling while sitting around a bonfire singing camp songs and roasting marshmallows to make s'mores with best friends. Fires will not just draw a community together for fellowship, but they can be dangerous, even destructive, tearing lives apart. We've heard about and perhaps have even seen fires destroy homes and apartment complexes to such an extent that families lose their livelihood and have to start from scratch. Maybe we've even seen images of people jumping out of apartment building windows to flee a fire's destructive path as smoke rises to the sky. Architectural damage is not the only result of a fire's path. Think forest fires and the burning of land—ecological harm. Moreover, we've seen how fires have been set ablaze on urban streets during times of unrest and protest—cars on fire, shops on fire, streets on fire. Fire used to destroy and to retaliate and to cry out against injustice. People have even set themselves on fire as a form of protest against injustices and as a way to draw attention to a cause. Fires can be dangerous and threatening. Fires can fan the flames of fear.

Some Christian preachers have used the image of fire to do that very thing. In his 1741 sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Jonathan Edwards proclaims, "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent

is in ours.” How about that jolly sermon? Probably wouldn’t go over too well here in Duke Chapel. According to Edwards, we are sinful spiders who hang from a “slender thread.”

Maybe this hell fire and brimstone sermon would be better named “sinners in the hands of an angry preacher.” Lord knows we have lots of them. Angry, disgruntled preachers who hate church members and think the only problem with the church is the people or preachers who specialize in scaring parishioners into salvation. I’ve even heard a seminary-trained preacher proclaim to those in the pews—and I was one of ones in the pews—that they weren’t praising God because they were mean. Let’s hope that preacher has a congregation of only one—himself! Beating folks up from a bully pulpit. At times, congregations have been made to fear as the constructive avenue toward conversion to Christianity and turning to God. Edwards said this was the method to “awaken the unconverted.” But I think James Baldwin had it right when he writes, “People, I felt, ought to love the Lord *because* they loved Him, and not because they were afraid of going to Hell.” With this problematic hell and brimstone homiletical approach, fire stokes fear and only feeds into our modern day culture of fear—fear of strangers, guarding borders against so-called aliens, fear of that which is different or unknown. Because of this approach, one may walk away thinking the gospel is really bad news when it’s supposed to be good news.

But this is not to say that the image of fire is unbiblical or irrelevant for Christian spirituality. John the prophet tells us otherwise and uses fire to talk about judgment. The spiritual that inspires Baldwin’s book title, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!” uses fire as a warning, a symbol of judgment, against America if the “racial nightmare” in his day did not end. One must be honest—the biblical witness utilizes fire as a metaphor of judgment.

“[Jesus] 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.” This is unequivocally and unmistakably a message about God’s judgment, especially when we pair it with what John said earlier about the axe lying at the root of the trees. It is not a heartwarming portrait at first. A baptism by fire is a cleansing, purifying, burning, refining fire. It is judgment; this is why we engage in liturgical and personal confession—we have not reached perfection.

But there is also the divine promise. There is the assurance of pardon. There is the word of hope. There is the promise of God’s presence. Yet, the fire is inevitable. Isaiah helps us understand this. “When you pass through the waters...when you walk through the fire.” When, not if. The fires of life are unavoidable. We will have pain. We will endure hardships. There will be struggle. There will be cancer. There will be broken relationships. There will be Alzheimer’s disease. There will be violence in schools. There are fires burning in the land and maybe in your own life. But the promise of God is that you will not be overwhelmed. You will not be burned. You will not be consumed because God declares, “I will be with you” and “I am with you.” This is the promise of presence such that we do not need to fear the fire no matter how dangerous it may appear to be. Do not fear the fire. God is present with us, the promise of Christmas and Epiphany.

Why would God go through all of the trouble of creating us and loving us in order to destroy us in the end? I believe we are “sinners in the hands of a loving God.” Fires are real but so is God. Isaiah reminds us that God is the one who created you and formed you and loves you and claims you. Thus, God says, “Do not fear, for I am with you.” God is in love with God’s people so much so that God wants to be with us (“I will be with you”). God does not leave us in the fire alone.

Several years ago, there were rampant summer fires in Greece. A Greek mother ran out of her house with her children to escape the fires she thought were moving in the direction of her home. She took her kids and jumped into her car to get away but everywhere she turned there were only walls of fire. They had nowhere to run or nowhere to hide. She could only get out of her car, sit down and hold her four children in her arms as the fires burned them to death. God is like this mother, holding us and loving us, even unto death, in the midst of the fire, never leaving us alone. God will risk God's life for us. God is in the fire with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and you and me.

But God's presence is also a fire. Fire can be constructive. Do not fear because God's love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). By love, God not only enters the fire, but God's love is a fire, God's Spirit of love, the Holy Spirit, God's "flame of love," a notion taken from 16th century St. John of the Cross (Clark Pinnock). "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." A baptism of fire is also a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus plays with fire by baptizing you with the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity who has been called "the hallmark of Christianity" (Craddock) for the book of Luke and Acts. The Holy Ghost fire. The fire that is invoked in Jamaican churches where they sing, "Fire, fire, fire, fire fall on me." The image of fire as a metaphor for the Spirit is seen prominently at the day of Pentecost where tongues of fire rested on everyone as a sign of God's presence. Not a sign to be feared or of pain or of judgment but a sign of God's promise of presence. A sign of hope and an experience of joy. A blessing of baptism.

A baptism of the Spirit is a baptism through water and through fire. As a Christian, you are fire baptized and what is burned away, at least eschatologically, is fear and anxiety. "Do not fear." When the heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit descends on us through the waters of baptism, the Spirit embraces your whole life and body with peace like a dove. Peace, perfect peace. "Do not fear, for I am with you" even in the water, even in the fire. As the water of baptism washes over you, the flame of love, the Spirit, ignites and initiates your new life as God welcomes you into the family of God and claims you as his child and says, "you are mine, you are precious in my sight, and I love you." "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is the blessing of baptism. The blessing of the fire, the flame of love.

Christ's baptism is our baptism in that we are baptized into Christ, the anointed one. And as God embraces us as children of God through baptism, we become children of the Spirit, children of the water, children of the fire. God's fire. God's Spirit. God's light. God's presence with us, so do not fear. We burn but are not burned in God's baptismal flame of love. God's presence is the Exodus flame of fire in a bush burning but not consumed (Exod 3:2). In God's presence, you will be set on fire but will not extinguish because through our baptism God promises to be with us forever. God will not destroy you. "Do not fear." God will ignite you with an eternal flame of love to make you children of the fire whose baptism comes in "bodily form" from your head to your toes to deep down in your bones.

May your heart not only be strangely warmed but may you testify to the water and the word in your heart as with a burning fire shut up in your bones (Jeremiah 20:9). For when the fire is in your bones, it's inescapable. And why would one want to escape God's fire anyway? I know I don't and I hope you won't. In other words, burn, baby, burn.