

Matthew 3: 1-12  
Advent1C  
November 27, 2016  
Lincoln Street UMC

Fire. Heat. It's a powerful catalyst for change. Do you remember as a child when you first put it all together that ice, water and steam were all made of the same thing - just heated to different degrees?

How could something as hard as ice - like a rock really - be the same thing as what so easily also runs over the lip of the bathtub and across the bathroom floor? Let alone have it be the same thing that can hurt when it bellows from the spaghetti pot.

But it is, as we come to understand. It is thanks to fire.

We talk about doing things in the heat of the moment. Usually these are times when something has spurred us beyond what was expected.

And we find ourselves compelled to speak up when we usually keep our thoughts to ourselves.

Or we invite the stranger in or take the class. Or we find ourselves swept away by passion and transported to a place where perhaps we hardly recognize ourselves - for good or ill.

The fire of passion. It can have all sorts of wild and unexpected results in our lives.

This morning, John the Baptizer, he's got the crowds all riled up. In his camel hair toga and his leather strap sandals, with honey stuck in his uncombed beard, this is a guy who is too focused on his message to care much about anything else.

And here we are told that he is going at the crowds, especially the Pharisees and Sadducees.

“Don’t give me any flack about your having this covered,” John challenges them. “I’m telling you that no past associations, even with the blessed Abraham, are going to be enough to do the trick.”

John goes on to explain, “What God wants to see is a conversion, a change in your life, so bold and so beautiful that there is no mistaking whose child you are.

God’s presence is going to be breaking in on us and we need to be ready.”

“So show God you mean it. Show it with your whole lives. Bear fruit that is full and obvious evidence that you have changed and re-turned toward the presence of the Divine that’s here.”

In other words, show the world and show God that you mean what you say.

This last Sunday as you may recall Lincoln Street Church held its Charge Conference. During the worship service Erin, the District Superintendent, led us through contemplating the roots of the Methodist Church - she began with the story of the first Pentecost when people were brought together by the Spirit even though they spoke in many languages; and then Erin turned to our roots in the story of the birth of Methodism, which was really a revival movement of the Anglican Church.

Both of these stories featured fire. Tongues of flame rested upon each person at that first Pentecost - a sign of the Spirit of God upon them. And John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is quoted as having felt his heart strangely warmed.

That warming leads him to giving his whole life over to the full and complete returning of the Anglican Church to an institution that to his understanding bears fruit.

Now, some of you know that I am Presbyterian by birth and for the first 35 years of my life that was the church of my home and pastoral calling. And as I sat listening to Erin's fervor, I couldn't help but laugh at myself.

Thinking that indeed maybe the familiar nickname for Presbyterians really applied to me - the frozen chosen.

All that talk of conversion at charge conference was making me a little nervous. Conversion is not a common theme in my life. Sitting in the Epworth sanctuary, I had a bitty crisis of faith, as I just couldn't see myself in these stories of such passion.

And well, what did *that* mean? After all, I am a pastor in the Methodist tradition, following in the way cleared by John Wesley himself. But frankly, just not feeling it for the big guy. (That would be John, not Jesus.) Or at least not in the way he seemed to prescribe.

I think that's often a danger in the church. As we teach our stories and traditions, it is way too easy for us to appear to prescribe what is expected of a "real" Christian.

As though John the Baptizer were here to say, "When I say bear fruit, what I mean is that you need to grow pineapples and you need to grow peaches and you pears and you pumpkins. Grow fruit, and this is specifically what your fruit needs to look like."

But when one listens closely to John the Baptizer I think what we hear is another kind of call. It's more of the wake-up-and-take-this-seriously kind rather than the wake-up-cause-God-is-going-to-getcha-if-you-don't-do-this-right kind.

He says he is baptizing with water but another one will be baptizing with fire and spirit.

In other words, things are going to heat up, and when things heat up, as we know from chemistry, life is going to change. From frozen ice to steam that can burn if you aren't careful.

And John the Baptizer doesn't want us to get burned. He wants to be sure that this fire, this heat, is applied in the right place and is going to make a difference for good, for love, for God.

So, think about a time in your life when you had a transformative moment. When you knew you were humming with the intentions of the universe.

When your longings and the world's need<sup>1</sup> seemed to fit together like snug puzzle pieces. That's the fruit that we're talking about here.

You all know it. Last week we fired the flame of the candle with gratitude. And so many of you shared vocations, commitments, passions that bring you meaning and fill you with gratitude. That's what we're talking about. That's fruit.

Few of us will be so consumed with flame that our whole lives will be given over - as nuns to a convent or as John the Baptizer to the Jordan or as John Wesley to the church circuit. But all of us can grab ahold of moments when we feel heat rise up from our bellies and then we can try to grow from that.

Like the people of our Aboriginal painting, let us be drawn to the sacred fire of life. Let us gather around the heat of passion given to us as gift from our Creator and ground ourselves and our choices in that.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Frederick Buechner for this language.

And then the fire we share will grow as we each bring the fuel of our lives.

And the flames we bring together will grow into a bonfire that will light the sky so that we will be able to “see far and to imagine with boldness.”<sup>2</sup>

And our land, our neighborhoods, our world, will be made ready. Made Advent ready. Clearing a space and a way for hope to grow as it did on that first Christmas.

The fire of passion. It can have all sorts of wild and unexpected results in our lives.

May it be so this Advent, and always.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *From a prayer by Ralph Metzner, Earth Prayers, HarperSan Francisco, (c) 1991, page 134.*