

2021 12 12 – Lessons from Fire & Water

Luke 3:7-18 (The Inclusive Bible)

OK, confession time, I have been known to avoid this particular scripture reading because I have often struggled to find joy in John's words. I mean he does refer to the crowd in front of him as "a pack of snakes," or "a brood of vipers!" Can you imagine what would happen to a United Church minister who spoke like that to their congregation? It's definitely not a great way to start a sermon!

This first century prophet also speaks of the "wrath to come" as if an angry God is going to come and punish all those who do not repent their sins. The beginning of John's speech is reminiscent of the fire and brimstone sermons that we sometimes hear from evangelical preachers on TV or radio. These preachers attempt to frighten people into confessing their sins and opening their wallets. In order to do that, the preachers often use images of raging infernos or all-consuming floods.

We all know about the power of fire and water. This year our neighbours in British Columbia have been ravaged by both of these forces of nature. This summer they experienced the devastation of out of control forest fires and just last month unprecedented flooding caused loss of life and over 450 million dollars in damage. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-flood-damage-1.6280393> And now, we can add wind to that list as at least 24 tornadoes ripped across several states south of our border on Friday night causing catastrophic damage

and the death of at least 100 people. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/us-kentucky-tornado-aftermath-1.6282935>

Yes, wind and water and fire can all cause tremendous pain and suffering. In fact, there are stories in the Bible, like Noah and the flood, suggesting that God has used the forces of nature as a weapon to punish humankind. But I do not believe in that God. I do not believe in a God of wrath or a God that manipulates the forces of nature for any purpose. I believe in a God that is the essence of love, a God that is the Ground of our Being, a God of justice and compassion.

And, if we don't stop at the first verse of today's scripture reading, if we listen to more of John's speech, then it starts to become clear that John believes in a God of love and justice too. John tells these people, these snakes, that if they want a strong, healthy connection to their God, then they need to do more than just be descendants of Abraham and Sarah. It isn't enough to just belong to a particular faith or culture. John tells them that they have to "produce good fruit" too.

And when the people ask for clarification John says, "Let the one with two coats share with the one who has none. Let those who have food do the same." He is telling the people that they are to care for, to love their neighbour. When the tax collector and the soldiers also question the prophet, John goes on to explain that we need to treat each other with fairness and that we should recognize and be grateful that what we have is enough.

Let's be clear; we don't need to "produce good fruit" in order for God to love us. We are all God's beloved children no matter what we say or do. But when we reach out in love to our neighbour, when we treat each other fairly, when we live with gratitude, then we feel God's love in our lives. We all know that giving makes us feel good and that good feeling is the essence of love. It is God's joy bubbling up inside of us.

But John's exhortation, his sermon, didn't end there. The people were starting to think that maybe John was the one that they had been waiting for, the one who would free them from the oppression of the Roman Empire and restore their past glory. So they asked, "Are you the Messiah?" John said, Absolutely not, I'm baptizing you in water, but someone is coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not fit to untie! This One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire." He was, of course, talking about his cousin, Jesus.

And he was using those same elements of nature: water, fire and spirit or wind. In fact, John goes even further with his analogy and says, "A winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff will be burnt in unquenchable fire." You might think, "Oh no, don't tell me we're back in the fire and brimstone sermon!" But we need to look closer. Yes, they are all there, these elements of nature, but this is a different fire, a different wind, a different way of using water.

These elements of nature are not just destructive forces. They are also sources of life, sources of energy and warmth. We are born through the waters of

childbirth and our bodies are 60% water, our homes are heated by the fires in our furnaces, and often forced air is used to bring that heat to every room. Even electricity is created by wind, fast flowing water, and fire.

These elements of nature are also used to clean and to clear away debris. Water is used in the sluicing process to discover gold. Fire is used in the refining process to separate precious minerals. Wind is still used to separate the grain from the chaff in our modern combines. These elements of nature all have lessons to teach us about both the power and the healing compassion that is love.

What John is describing, in his sermon, is a carefully controlled process. He is describing the way that God's healing love is able to remove only those pieces of each one of us that are no longer needed or wanted. None of us are made up only of chaff. None of us are about to be burnt up in an unquenchable fire. Instead, the Spirit of love, whether it takes the form of fire, wind or water, will be used to give us new life, to renew us, to heal us from that which is causing us pain.

Water, wind and fire are all images that are used to describe God's Loving Spirit. Think of the water of your baptism, the flame of the Christ candle, the winds of Pentecost. They symbolize not destruction but the energizing power of love in the world.

Jesus was so filled with God's Spirit that he was able to use that Love as a healing force in people's lives. That Holy Mystery, that Spirit of Compassion, is here with us even now. And that is the Good News.

In this Advent season we prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus and we ready ourselves for the coming of that compassionate healing spirit into each one of our lives. A flowing, fiery love that brings with it the promise of hope, peace and joy. May it be so. Amen.