

Sermon, Advent 2, December 8, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:12)

We heard these same words a year ago on the third Sunday of Advent from Luke’s version of John the Baptist’s prophetic words concerning Jesus. Luke ends his telling of the story with: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” (Luke 3:18) Perhaps Luke thought the “good news” was not readily apparent! Last year I was more attuned to what John may have meant about the chaff, so I said this: Yes, John’s language is fierce. Yet the thing to notice is that the winnowing fork is in Jesus’ hand. It is Jesus who removes the chaff from the grains of wheat. Chaff is the protective covering around cereal grains. It has a purpose. It is only that its removal is necessary for the grain to be usable. This year I was drawn to the “unquenchable fire.”

In Advent we are drawn gently into this fire. We light the Advent candles one-by-one. Perhaps some of you have Advent wreaths at home, or you are putting up lights inside and outside your houses. I love the quiet expectancy of Advent; yet I find the plethora of lights cheering. I learned from a friend who spent time in Denmark that Scandinavia, being so far north, and so dark this time of year, has the highest per-capita use of candles anywhere in the world. Each lighted candle

represents God's presence with us now: Emmanuel. At the same time the small flames point to the return of God's Light.

In the eastern Orthodox Church there is a concept of "uncreated light." There are the lights that God does create: sun, moon, and stars. There is also the light of God's presence that sometimes reveals itself to the human eye in the form of fire. There is the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the trackless desert at night. Jesus' disciples see the almost indescribable transfiguration of Jesus' face and clothes so that they appeared full of light. There are the Holy Spirit flames of Pentecost that rest on people's heads. And we have the story of Moses encountering God in the wilderness in the form of a burning bush.

I happened on some fascinating commentaries on the burning bush assembled by Prof. Etan Levine. He suggests perhaps God chooses the bush because of its lowliness. God could have become manifest in high mountains or the vastness of space. Instead God's purpose is to convey intimacy, nearness and accessibility.¹ When Moses shows his trepidation at what God is asking him to do, God says, "I will be with you." Another commentary concerns the presence of the angel in the fire. This angel is most frequently identified as the archangel Michael. Once again with the alchemy of Hebrew vowels that allows interesting word

¹ Etan Levine, "Midrash on the Burning Bush," *Reconstructionist* 36, no. 14 (January 1, 1971): 24.

associations, the angel appearing in a “flame of fire” could also be an angel with a “heart of fire.” This angel is able to inspire Moses with courage. The fire kindles Moses’ spirit.² Finally there is a commentary relating the burning bush to the spiritual experience of a human being “on fire” for God. “The bush signifies the heart; or the bush signifies the body. A flame burns in the heart and the heart is not consumed; a flame burns in the heart and the body is not consumed.”³

God’s Light is healing, creative, transforming. Yet, like John the Baptist’s words, it can also be fierce. It is an *unquenchable* fire. “Under the influence of its heat, even *now*, fear melts into reverent awe; love warms and trembles with breathless wonder... This is the true fire of God’s righteous Judgment, burning like an ember in the manger; like a shower of new sparks at our Baptism; and like a furnace of irresistible power at the final Unveiling, enfolding all things in Christ, who will be all in all.” (Br. Keith Nelson, SSJE)

This coming Tuesday, December 10, is the third anniversary of my ordination to the diaconate. The first Gospel readings I had the privilege to proclaim were those of Advent and Christmas in Year A: the same readings we have this year. The joy and trepidation I felt has come rushing back, giving these readings a special sense of immediacy. I remember I did manage two retreat days

² Ibid., 26.

³ Ibid., 27.

at SSJE's Emery House before my ordination. This retreat house is in Newburyport near the coast. The main building is a large colonial house with the addition of a modern chapel built into the lower level. I had never been there before, although I have stayed at the guest house in Cambridge several times, often attending Evening Prayer when taking some classes at EDS one year. I was given one of the hermitage spaces some distance from the main building. The first morning I was there it snowed lightly. It was so beautiful and peaceful to wake up to. The hermitage I was in had many windows looking out on the surrounding fields, as does the chapel.

The brothers in residence invited me to read the Hebrew Bible reading for the Eucharist that morning. It was Ecclesiasticus 2: 7-11, 15-18. Verse 18 particularly struck me:

“Let us fall into the hands of the Lord,
but not into the hands of mortals;
for equal to his majesty is his mercy,
and equal to his name are his works.”

Somehow reading these words out of the silence of the place and the contemplative mode of the Eucharist gave them deep meaning for me. I reflected that it had been easy to give in to the fear of “falling into the hands of mortals” either for myself or others. To be reminded that God's mercy is equal to God's majesty was a

wonderful thing. Ordination to the transitional diaconate was really only the beginning. It has felt like falling sometimes. I love the poem “Autumn” by Rainer Maria Rilke that has this line: “...And yet there is One who holds this falling endlessly gently in his hands.”

John the Baptist does give us this powerful image of Jesus as one with a “winnowing fork is in his hand.” The wheat will be gathered, the chaff burned. Yet it matters that it is Jesus—our friend and savior—who does this. When we encounter the “unquenchable fire” we know we are on holy ground. Taking off our shoes or veiling our faces is appropriate. Perhaps this is what John the Baptist meant when he said, “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” (Matthew 3:11) This is the fire of love. “...[It is] not a hearth fire, but a wildfire.” (Br. Keith Nelson, SSJE) May it kindle our hearts.