

Expecting Fire!

*a sermon delivered on Dec. 4, 2022 by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno
based on Matthew 3:1-12*

This guy goes to see his barber and he's all excited. His barber is a total curmudgeon and always throws cold water over everything anyone tells him, but his customer can't contain himself so he tells his barber he's leaving soon for Italy. He's going to fly Alitalia, stay at the Rome Hilton, and he's going to see the Pope.

The barber who's Italian himself and has been to Italy says, O geez, Alitalia is "a terrible airline," and the Rome Hilton is "a dump," and he'll never get anywhere near the Pope because the crowds at papal audiences are "crushing."

Well, the fellow goes to Rome, comes back two weeks later and is back in the chair and his barber says, "How'd it go?" The guy says, Alitalia was fine, no delays, and the Rome Hilton was terrific in every respect, and he says he actually got an audience with the Pope.

"You met the Pope," the barber says, and the guy replies, "Yeah, I did, and I even bent down and kissed his ring."

"Well, what'd his holiness say to you?" And the guy says, "He said, 'Where did you get such a lousy haircut?'"

Well, John the Baptist was the total curmudgeon of the Bible. He never has a good thing to say about anything, and you can be sure he would have had a lousy haircut himself.

I mean, he wore what no self-respecting person would wear, itchy camel's hair. He ate what no self-respecting person would eat, grasshoppers. And all day long he's shouting to the people who have come out into the Judean desert to see such an oddball, "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near. Bear fruit worthy of repentance, you worthless sinners."

He tells hypocrites they're not welcome. He tells the merely curious to go home. Anyone bearing bad fruit (that's most everyone) should expect to be burned with an unquenchable fire once the Messiah shows up, which John says will be very soon. "The ax is already laid at the root of the tree," he says, and the tree, being rotten, will soon be brought down.

John the Baptist's message is not easy to swallow. I mean, it's one thing to be asked to repent of your sins. It's another to be called a "brood of vipers." Actually, the literal translation of what John says is highly colorful. He calls them, "snake bastards." No kidding.

For John, right was right, and wrong was wrong and that was that. Life for John was entirely black and white, with no shades of gray. His literalism makes him very unforgiving, and perpetually angry.

Anne Lamott once spoke of descending to that level of wrathful indignation when her son, Sam, was 13. Here is what she said: "Living with a teenager can feel like living . . . with a drug addict who has three days clean and sober. I tried to think about how nice it would be **not** to see Sam for 24 hours . . . This is one thing they forget to mention in most child rearing books; that at times you will just lose your mind. Period." She even confesses, "I thought about stoning him. Jesus would have said, 'Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, and tax collectors, and 13 year olds . . . and he'd have said this right before he picked up a rock.'"

Probably not, but John the Baptist certainly would have. But, look, how refreshing for parents of teenagers to hear another outraged mom say something like that out loud.

Anne sums up being Sam Lamott's mother this way, "He needs me to listen, to be clear and fair and parental. But most of all he needs me to be alive in a way that makes him feel he will be able to bear adulthood, because he is terrified of death, and that includes growing up to be one of the stressed-out, gray-faced adults he sees rushing around him."

And look, I'm guessing that Anne said those wise words because she had been an impossible teenager herself.

And, you know, John the Baptist was probably quite the shady character once, too.

Why? Because the people who come down the hardest on others are almost always people who believe they deserve major punishment themselves. They may not own up to the specifics of that, but they usually see themselves as guilty as sin.

So, call it projection or what you will -- people who love tossing fire and brimstone down on others often eventually confess, or are forced to confess, that their hearts are sometimes scummy.

The odd thing, of course, in the case of John the Baptist, was that Jesus wasn't anything like John. But then John could only imagine what he could imagine. I mean, John's sense of the heart of God was that God must be mad as heck, and would act accordingly.

Now, (major shift) fast forward 2000 years. Just think about what happened when Nelson Mandela was about to be let out of prison. Just imagine what a lot of the white leadership in South Africa expected. Here, they had put this man in prison for 27 years, after having been sentenced first to only five -- this man who was anything but the anarchist they had painted him to be, -- this man who, before and during his long imprisonment, spoke only in favor of democracy -- freedom and justice for all South Africans.

They expected his idea of justice would lead to reprisals -- black South Africans punishing minority whites. They expected exactly what they knew they deserved, "Fire" -- just the kind John the Baptist said the world ought to get; and Nelson Mandela didn't give it to them. No more than Jesus came to earth armed with an ax and a nuclear weapon.

I'm not saying Mandela was Jesus. We all know he wasn't. He went through several metamorphoses. Young South Africans are still making up their minds about whether, to avoid a race war, Mandela sold the farm to the white minority, but I'll tell you this --

he got his ethical outlook from Jesus, not from John The Baptist.

So let us consider that ethic. Jesus, remember, was the one who when a woman was arrested by a posse of religious fellows for adultery, slowed the whole lynch mob down by bending down to write something in the dust.

When they finally got up the gumption to speak to him, one of them said, "What should be done with such a woman? Moses, the great prophet of Israel said that such a woman ought to be stoned."

We don't know what Jesus was writing there in the dust. All we know is that once he was done, without looking at the woman, or them, he merely said, "Okay, let him who is without sin cast the first stone," and to their credit, the men dropped their stones and went away one-at-a-time, beginning with the oldest among them."

You know, I think it was worth all the trouble of him coming to earth just to have said that. And I cannot imagine John the Baptist ever saying anything resembling it.

You know, Jesus was also the one who, when they put him up on a cross with nails still had it in him to say, "God, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

Now, John is partly right. He knows the world is ripe for something of God to enter it afresh. John is right to point to a coming divine visitation. He is even right in saying that the one who is to come will be bringing fire with him.

But the fact is, Jesus is not coming with a fire of destruction. He is coming with a fire of transformation; a fire meant to melt and mold the world into something holy, too.

Barbara Brown Taylor says the following about this fire --

I do not mean to minimize the danger. This is not safe fire; it can still burn and kill. But it is God's own fire, the fire of God's presence, fire that wants to speak to us, guide us, instruct us. It is the fire of a potter who wants to make useful vessels out of damp clay. It is the fire of a jeweler who wants to refine pure gold from rough ore. It does not have to be the fire of destruction, in other words.

It may also be the fire of transformation, a fire that both lights us up and changes us, melting us down and reforming us more nearly to the image of God. It is the fire with which Jesus himself baptizes us, inviting us into bright, hot relationship with him. Even when the fire seems bent on consuming us, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, we find that we have company, and that even in the hottest regions of our own personal hells we do not sweat alone.

Nelson Mandela brought fire with him when he left prison. Not the all-consuming fire his unjust persecutors expected. The transforming fire he brought was called, the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission." It was a grand experiment like nothing the earth has seen.

It was meant to try the souls of blacks and whites alike who were guilty of racial crimes.

In exchange for their public confessions the confessors were given amnesty.

Bishop Desmond Tutu gave the reason: "It is not enough to say, 'Let bygones be bygones.' Indeed, just saying that ensures that it will not be so. Reconciliation does not come easy. . . .We have to work and look the beast firmly in the eyes. Ultimately you discover that without forgiveness, there is no future."

There is a twofold message here -- Evil should not go unnoticed, but, we need to be careful of revenge; it is an endless cycle.

Here is how Bishop Tutu put it: "We were determined that history would not be sanitized by the victorious side, and so those who suffered at the hands of the forces of liberation are also invited to share their experiences."

So -- a story of a secret police torture was followed by a white farmer's story of how his wife and children were killed by a land mine planted by the ANC -- (the black liberation forces).

The whole experiment was about reverencing the suffering of the victims over obsession with revenge for the victimizers."

As the victims told their stories their stature grew in the light of public scrutiny.

"Today," said one man after giving testimony before the commission, 'the nation cried my tears with me."

The perpetrators of violence, by contrast, found themselves diminished in the very telling of their actions in light of history; thus, a kind of natural revenge occurred.

And then there were the small unaccountable miracles – a police officer who masterminded an attack that wiped out several black families in a rural village stood and faced his victims:

He said, "I can never undo what I have done. I have no right to ask your forgiveness, but I ask that you will allow me to spend the rest of my life helping you rebuild your village and put your lives together."

Peter Storey said the following of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

"It is the place where the guilty discover the pain of forgiveness because the innocent are willing to bear the greater pain of forgiving."

The fire, this fire from God, had to burn everyone. Everyone.

As I said, John the Baptist was partly right. He knew the world was ripe for something of God to enter it afresh. John was right in saying that the one who was to come would be bringing fire with him. But the fact is, Jesus did not come bringing a fire of destruction.

He came with a fire of transformation; a fire meant to melt and mold the world, meaning all of us, into something holy, too.

I wonder if our hotly divided nation might find a way to endure a similar crucible. Thank God for the lives of John the Baptist, and Jesus, and Nelson Mandela.

Amen