

Holy Fire

Has your mother or father ever told you that, “You should never play with fire.” I know mine did. But sometimes the call for adventure outweighs our need to respect the boundaries our parents have set. I remember one sleepy summer day when I was about 6 or 7 my best childhood friend Alan and I cleverly slipped away from the supervision of our parents. We had stumbled upon a book of matches and the magic inside was more than we could bear. It was hard to tell what was more exhilarating: escaping from confinement like free-range chickens or simply letting the fiery genie loose to see what would happen.

We stealthily slipped away to a vacant field with high, dry grass and before we knew just what a wild and fickle friend fire was, the flames had grown so fast and tall that we panicked and ran deliriously from the scene of the crime. Fortunately, a very alert neighborhood mom spotted the smoke and quickly and vigorously beat the fire into submission with a broom while my friend and I, in complete terror and invisibility, hid behind some nearby rockery debating whether we should turn ourselves in.

Now, as an adult, I reassure you that I have cleaned up my act a bit. I have learned the danger of playing with matches but the fire still beckons me. Everyone who has ever served with me knows that my favorite liturgy of the year is the Easter Vigil—largely because it is the one time of the year that I get to set and light a bonfire—in church no less-- and call it Holy. The backstory regarding my love of holy fire goes back to the time our former Rector, Jeff Lee, now Bishop of Chicago, commissioned me to try my hand at sanctified fire-setting. I will never forget his godly counsel, “Now, Steve, I don’t want a tame fire. It needs to be on the edge of getting away from us. After all the Spirit of God should never be domesticated.” And I think Jeff was right. Either life with God is one daring adventure or it isn’t worth living.

In today’s gospel story from Luke, Jesus jars us with his opening line, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed.” What kind of fire is Jesus talking about?” Now when you think about it, fire is full of spiritual, as well as psychological meaning. In the Bible, as well as in most great

wisdom literature, fire destroys but can also cleanse, heal, and purify. Its energy can be a powerful symbol for what creates eternal life or brings about eternal death. Its heat can be like a crucible that burns away all of the impurities within our souls so that pure spiritual gold is all that remains. This may have been what Jesus meant when he said, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.”

Of course there is also a comforting and homey side to fire as well. Remember the story of the post-resurrection Jesus cooking breakfast for his disciples over an open fire in the spirit of hospitality and friendship. And let us not forget the fire of Pentecost when so many of disciples were so lit up and “on fire for the Lord” that they couldn’t wait to spread the Good News, embarking on exciting adventures one after another involving miracles, conversions, baptisms, and freeing the oppressed. So as you can see, fire has multiple meanings and roles in the biblical story of our salvation.

Returning to today’s Gospel lesson, we see that Jesus refers to a “baptism of fire” that leads to ultimate transformation through the power of the Cross. It is the journey that seeks pure spiritual gold and won’t settle for anything less. He is warning all who might follow him that their discipleship will likely be very costly but will lead to exciting experiences and changes within their souls that are beyond their wildest imaginings.

This morning we will be sending-off and blessing seven young adult pilgrims as they begin the journey to adulthood: Beret, Claire, Isabel, Julia, Lindsay, Mitchell, and Stephi. We will also be blessing their adult leaders as well. They will be backpacking in the rugged North Cascades for six demanding days stretching themselves spiritually, physically, relationally and in every way imaginable over nearly 40 miles of trail. We are proud of all of them and all of their leaders, mentors, and parents who have helped them to embark upon their own versions of being “baptized by Spirit and fire” reaching for a new dependency upon Christ that will transform their former identities into something even more beautiful than what they left town with.

It will be risky business and is playing with fire. As in Jesus’ day, it is still true today, our original identities, values, and even our names are inherited from our fathers, mothers, and cultural institutions. Many of the first Christians who first heard today’s gospel story would have experienced rejection by their own families as they caught the “fire of God’s love” and began expressing the radical ideals of Christ in fresh, engaging, and challenging ways.

We as parents, teachers, elders, and the Body of Christ gathered at St. Thomas have also been presented with a spiritual challenge.

Can we accept these youth, upon return from their pilgrimage, as full, adult members of the Body of Christ avoiding the temptation to discount what they have to say to us because of their younger age?

Can we sincerely listen to them with open and receptive hearts as they question the way we do church and speak prophetically into our community of faith here at St. Thomas?

Can we learn from their willingness to take risks in order so we, not just them, can move towards increasing levels of spiritual maturity and health?

Just like our spiritual ancestors, the ancient Israelites, we are all invited to enter the wilderness of God's transformation relying on pillars of fire to lead us for all of us were created by God to play and travel with fire. Amen.