

## "UNQUENCHABLE FIRE"

(a sermon based on Matthew 3: 1-17, page 2 in the New Testament NRSV)

by

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Matthew's Gospel, in telling of the Baptism of Jesus, starts out with a sermon about **FIRE!** It seems a little crazy at first... Here is John (that Baptist), standing in the Jordan River, scooping up **water** as he baptizes, but all the while he is talking about **unquenchable fire!** It's a mixed metaphor, if you ask me. Actually, he used a whole series of "fire images!"

Back in the 1970's, Clarence Jordan (founder of **Koinonia Farms** in Americus, Georgia, origin also of **Habitat for Humanity**) paraphrased the New Testament in colloquial American language as spoken in the Deep South. He called it **the "Cotton Patch Gospel."** I'd like to share with you how Clarence Jordan re-interpreted today's Scripture lesson about John the Baptizer -- imagining how it might have sounded if John had been a **Southern Baptist** preacher...

*...You sons of snakes! Who warned you to flee from  
the fury of the fire about to bust o'er your heads!?  
You'd better start to change your lives,  
and "bear fruit that befits repentance"...  
and do not presume to say to yourselves:  
"We be good church folks..!"  
I tell you: if God wanted to, God could raise up good church folks  
from this here pile of rocks right here!" (Hallelujah!)  
His chain saw is already set at the root of the tree,  
and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be...  
cut down, chopped up, and thrown into the fire! (Hallelujah!)  
I dip you in water as a sign of a changed life...  
But he who is coming... He who is coming after me...  
is mightier than I! I am not worthy to shine his shoes!  
(Hallelujah!) (... could I hear a "Halleljuah!"?)  
He is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with FIRE!  
His combine is already running.  
He's gonna give this field a thorough going over.  
The grain he'll gather into his barn,  
and he'll burn up the stubble. (Hallelujah!)  
He's gonna do it! He's gonna! Praise God! Amen!*

Well, that's all in good fun. But the original Baptizer was serious! He had the smoldering smell of **sulfur** in his mind as he spoke of **fire!**

First, he says, like snakes (and wild animals) fleeing toward a river **when a forest fire rages** and urges them on... who warned the religious folk to **flee "the fury** about to bust o'er

their heads"? Is it possible that these self-righteous, holy men from Jerusalem, who pride themselves on their family pedigree as full-blooded, pure-bred "children of Abraham" actually came to "repent" and change?

No. They probably didn't think they *needed* baptism. They weren't about to repent or change their ways. They were (as Clarence Jordan puts it) "good church folk." So what brought them out from their Temple schools and their judgment halls to mingle among John's more ordinary followers? **If they weren't there to be part of his new movement** of the Spirit... then they were simply slippery, poisonous snakes!

So, John's first image (or metaphor) of fire is that of *a forest fire* chasing a "brood of vipers" out from their pits and down to the riverside. It is an ironic (almost sarcastic) way to "question the motives" of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who have come to see him.

Second, John the Baptist presents us with the image of *gathering up dead wood* (useless, fruitless, barren branches) to be used for kindling.

"Already the axe is laid to the root of the tree," says John, ***and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down***, chopped up, thrown into the fire!"

At first hearing, this sounds almost as destructive as his "forest fire" image, but not when you give it some thought... For at least this ***"fire-wood"*** has a constructive purpose... It goes into an oven or furnace; it is used for cooking, for a campfire, or a fireplace... (You can melt *s'mores*!)

So, as his second point, John uses the image of "collecting firewood" to motivate people to change their behavior (to begin to bear fruit) while there yet is time... to make productive applications of their faith ("Just ***Do It*** !").

In his baptism sermon, John points, first, to the destructive, furious force of fire... and, second, to the constructive use of fire. Then, third, the Baptizer uses the image of fire, ***burning the chaff and dry stubble*** of a farmer's field, after the grain – that is, after the good seed -- has been harvested and stored.

**I call this a "productive" use of fire** because, in a farmer's way of thinking, the stalks & dry husks (this year's *useless left-overs*) are "returned to dust" and ash -- ashes to ashes, and dust to dust -- but in so doing, the farmer restores minerals & nutrients to the soil as a base for next year's growth!

This "farmer's fire" -- as with the image of gathering fire-wood from barren tree branches -- (this use of fire) shows that ***some good can come*** from otherwise *useless* chaff, or from a field of dry stubble... Nothing is lost; ***even the left-overs are used*** !! (...albeit not in the most productive, fruitful, life-giving way as could be possible; but in the end not entirely "worthless" either).

Some fire is *destructive*, some is *constructive*, and some is actually *productive*. The Baptist covered all three in his sermon.

Let me repeat: John speaks, first, of the *forest fire* that causes snakes to head for the river... He hopes it will make his audience consider their motives! Like **a coming fire that**

**forces relocation**, John hopes that even the most self-satisfied and complacent person will be motivated to **re-evaluate their lives** in the light of the coming judgment of God.

John speaks, second, of the *furnace fire* that consumes cast-off barren branches, otherwise useless deadwood in an orchard. And, third, he speaks of the *farmer's fire* that eliminates dry stubble & chaff... in hopes that people who are living barren lives (spiritually barren lives) **will sprout new life**, and that his audience will begin to discern how much of their habits, beliefs, traditions, and religion *are yeasty, lively, valuable "grain"* and how much is just dry stalks from the past... empty hulls of *chaff!*

There we have three quick and creative uses of "fire" as illustrations... *Masterful metaphors*, if you ask me. It seems to me that John the Baptizer was quite a *poet*, as well as a great *preacher!* I'm tempted to stop right here & "preach" myself ("unpacking" each of those images as I would in a Bible Study)... but there is no time for that in today's service.

Instead, let me move to the most symbolic, and probably the most perplexing, sentence of John's whole "Fire Sermon"... When he says: *"The one who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with FIRE!"*

*"I baptize you in water as a sign of a changed life...  
But he who is coming after me is mightier than I!  
I am not worthy to untie his sandals!  
He is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with FIRE!"*

*"Baptized with the Holy Spirit and with FIRE!"?* What did John mean by that!?

"Baptism by fire." It's a familiar phrase, but what does it mean? **In business**, "baptism by fire" may be *presenting your first oral report* to the chairman of the board, or making your first sales call, or handling your first customer complaint.

In a "baptism by fire," one **learns by doing it**. Gird up your loins in leather, friend; swallow those butterflies; and just do it!

For a **lawyer**, one's baptism by fire would be arguing the case in court, face-to-face with a jury & a judge. For a **student teacher**, it is standing in front of a classroom full of students... hoping the lesson plan (on paper) will work with real people!

For some of us, our "baptism by fire" may have been filing divorce papers, or getting a restraining order... or being sued, or going through bankruptcy... Society uses the phrase for any of those occasions when **hard times** are encountered *and endured!* We come out *stronger* (or, at least, "saddened but wiser") because of it. "Baptism by fire."

Perhaps John -- that creative poet & prophetic preacher -- meant nothing more than *that* when he coined the phrase some 2,000 years ago. But I suspect (knowing something of the Baptist movement) that he was less concerned with "*society's* meaning" than he was with being faithfully focused upon **God's meaning!** I think John had a "biblical sense" of **fire**. (And that's more than literal, friends!)

"Baptism by fire" if it meant, *literally, "dipped in fire"* -- like John was dipping those folks in the water of the Jordan River -- would have been a scorching, painful, disfiguring event.

Certainly God would *not* intend us to take those words literally! (Some religions do, of course. In India and Sri Lanka, Hindu "fire walkers" enter a trance and walk across glowing coals as hot as a burning cigarette... with their feet unblistered. **Is that what John meant** with his talk of "baptism by fire"? Is that what we Christians must do **to prove our spirituality**? Go through *literal* flames!? I hope not. I prefer simple water! I prefer what John *did*, to what he *said*.)

When we hear John speak of "baptism by fire," let's not forget that we are dealing with a poet, a prophet, a preacher... He's not a scientist; he's not a literalist, a legalist, or a novelist... He's not an historian, or teacher of the Law. He's a poetic preacher...

And John's first three illustrations that use "fire-images" -- fleeing a forest-fire, gathering barren branches for firewood, and recycling nutrients by burning -- are metaphors, drawn from *real life experiences*, that make a point about human behavior. (They are like mini-parables.)

But there's something different going on when John begins to speak of an "unquenchable" fire. (If we're gonna get "literal," let's get real!) All three of those first *fires* will eventually go out! Even the worst forest fire (in time) burns itself out... the furnace goes dark. Smoke eventually clears from the smoldering chaff, and the farmer's blackened field comes back to life. *After the fury of a fire, life returns to normal*. Fire, as we experience it in real life, is never unquenchable. It may be fearful, furious, hard to control, but given time, every fire goes out *eventually*. Even the sun will one day burn itself out...

So where does John, the Biblical prophet, come up with an image of "**unquenchable**" fire? Where does one meet a fire that burns... but without consuming the fuel...!? Fires that won't burn up, nor go out...!?

Only three times in our Bible do we encounter stories in which fires burn without consuming. Each time the stories usher us into the presence of God in utterly *startling* ways... In each of the three stories (two from the Jewish Scriptures, one from the Acts of the Apostles) we see a brand new beginning for the people of God (a new covenant, one might say)... an encounter with the Living Spirit of God; each time, something NEW starts!

Taken in chronological order, the first "unquenchable fire" of the Bible was encountered by Moses, the great Law Giver and author of Torah.

One day, in the wilderness of the Sinai, while shepherding his father-in-law's sheep at Mount Horeb, Moses came upon a "burning bush" which burned without being consumed. Moses drew near to see this amazing thing -- this "unquenchable fire" --and heard the Word of God! It revealed the Divine Name of God (Yahweh/The LORD) and got him going!

The Exodus was underway. And that event, even moreso than the call of Abraham, is at the core of Jewish religious identity! *Moses and the burning bush*. That is the first Biblical image of an "unquenchable fire." It is *a manifestation of God's Spirit!* Don't fear it; *hear* it! God's call.

The second story of God's involvement in an unusual fire was "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" (three Jewish captives in Exile in Babylon) who allowed themselves to be thrown into a *fiery furnace*, trusting that God would help them "keep cool."

That familiar story (in the Book of Daniel) gives courage to oppress-ed people undergoing torture and martyrdom. It reassures them to know that the same "Son of God" who appeared in the flames alongside the three lads, to save them (such that the fire did not scorch them, nor did the smell of smoke cling to their clothes!) **is with us also** when we *rely on faith*.

The new thing that began with this *second* Bible story of fire is now called the Babylonian TALMUD. Because of their *unwavering faith in their saving God*, the Jewish colony in exile was given legal rights to worship their God in their own way, and to make their own laws. The teachings, laws, and traditions of the elders that are contained in the codes of the Talmud are second only to **Torah** in establishing Jewish identity to this very day! The Talmud, one might say, took the place of the prophets. Those stories gave rise to the Pharisees and today's "Rabbinic" Judaism.

The third event in which *unquenchable & unburning fire* played an important role was unknown to John the Baptizer, even though it clearly fulfilled his prophecy: "*The One who is coming after me... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*" While unknown to John, the experience was well known by Matthew and by the rest of the disciples of Jesus. We call it the "Pentecost" experience... the "birthday of the Church."

*Fifty days* after the Resurrection, 120 of Jesus' followers were all together in Jerusalem when, with the sound of a mighty wind, the Holy Spirit filled the room and (we are told in Acts 2) it divided and rested upon each one as "tongues of flame."

These flames were not a scorching, burning **fire**, but an inspiration -- an indwelling, a "kindling" of the Spirit -- after which the disciples took courage and began to tell the stories of Jesus. **This baptism by fire at Pentecost** is the *third time* in the Bible when we encounter an "unquench-able fire!" In each case, the flames are the symbol of the Spirit of God! (1) for Moses, at the start of Torah; (2) for the Jewish exiles, at the start of Rabbinic Judaism; and (3) for the disciples, at the start of the Church: each encountered the Living Spirit & Presence of God, and each described it as "fire." Non-burning, livable, *unquenchable fire*.

So, friends, rather than allow John "the Baptist's" images of "fire" to fill us with fear -- which makes us vulnerable to manipulation by those hell-fire, fear-mongering, preachers -- let's commit ourselves in faith to *the one to whom John points* (namely, JESUS!)... to the one whose "baptism by fire" **is the Holy Spirit itself**, and whose agenda of repentance is marked by grace and forgiveness of sin.

In that way, *the unquenchable fire*  
that (1) Moses met in the wilderness...  
that (2) empowered the faith of the exiles...  
& that (3) the disciples encountered in the Upper Room...  
may surprise us in our day with a new beginning...  
and fill us with its constructive, productive, power!

May that promised "baptism by the Holy Spirit and by fire" **call us out of ourselves** (as it called them so long ago) and into lives of boldness -- giving us courage in the struggle for justice (in our day as it did in theirs) and giving us ability to clearly articulate our values (in faithfulness to Christ) as it did in the Torah of Moses, in the Talmud of the Babylonian Exiles, and in the teachings of the Apostles.

And may *our* "fire of the Spirit" (here among the baptized believers of Seaside Church) be equally unquenchable!

Amen!