ADVENT 3C - Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18 - 16 December 2018 - A sermon given by The Rev. Peter A. Munson for the people of St. Ambrose Episcopal Church, Boulder, Colorado

*Messiah, Spirit, and Refining Fire*

INTRODUCTION - What fire does…

What are some things that fire does? (wait for answers)

* Fire consumes - destroys, burns thing until there is only ash remaining.
* Fire provides heat - “controlled” fire makes our life much more comfortable, and is instrumental in our cooking food that is edible and good.
* Fire provides light - prior to electricity, it was one of the main ways that people saw things at night.
* Fire refines - as with the work of the silversmith or goldsmith, fire can burn out the impurities and leave something that is pure and more valuable.
* Fire renews - think of forest fires. They get rid of the dead wood and allow for new growth to emerge.

SITUATION - John the Baptist points to the Messiah

The people flock to John to be baptized and he greets them with a blast furnace of words. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:7-9)

The people ask what they should do, and John tells them that they must change their lives. They must change the way that they treat other people.

Those with extra coats and extra food must share with those who do not have enough. Tax collectors must collect only what they are supposed to collect. Soldiers are not to extort money from people by using threats or false accusations, and are to be satisfied by their wages. (Luke 3:11-14)

The people are so impressed with John that they begin to wonder if he might be the Messiah. But before they could even ask him about this, he told them that he was doing a baptism with water thing, but that someone more powerful was coming, whom John was not even worthy to serve as a slave. This One would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. With his winnowing fork he will clear the threshing floor. The wheat he will gather into the granary, while the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Luke 3:16-17)

COMPLICATION

You know, it can be tempting to hear those words and think that the One we call Messiah is going to throw the good people into the granary and toss the bad people into the unquenchable fire. But there’s another way to interpret it that I think fits better with what John was saying to all of the people.

And it is this: The Lord is going to throw every single one of us into the fire, in the same way that the smith puts the gold or the silver into the fire… so that we will be refined. As in - made finer, made purer, molded into what can serve God’s purposes.

This refinement process doesn’t necessarily feel so good when you are in the midst of it. It can feel quite painful, in fact. We might be asked to give up ways of thinking or even long-term patterns of behavior. We might be asked to give up core, defining beliefs. We may be asked to learn new things, things that aren’t in our natural wheelhouse, things that don’t come to us easily.

This refining process, in my experience, very often feels like being tested.

When you were baptized, you - or your parents - gave the Lord license to refine you!

And God, being God, can refine us in any way that God wants to. I have already touched on a few of the ways.

* God can refine our perspective or attitude. I think that process often begins when God puts people in our lives who seem different from us, people who we may have had some judgments about.
* God can refine our bodies, our health. Yes, if this refining is designed to make us even more into the image and likeness of God, then God may choose to refine us in a way that we become healthier - in body, in mind, and in spirit.
* God can refine our priorities. What the world tells us is important…. well, let’s just say that God can come along and turn all of that upside-down.
* God can refine our dreams. We may have a dream that we believe is from God, and it very well may be such a dream, especially if the dream has something to do with blessing others or taking care of the planet. Just be aware that, as you pursue that dream, God can refine what you originally heard, especially if God realizes that those refinements will help you grow, and help you become more dependent on Him.
* God can refine our sense of “truth”. When we think we know the truth, and then we encounter the Truth - with a capital T - then it stands to reason that some deeper understanding will come, as our lives become more Spirit-led and less ego-driven.
* God can refine our prayers and our prayer life. I’m guessing you may not pray in the same way now as you did when you were 8! You may not pray in the same way now as you did when you were 28 or 48. God keeps working on us, we keep practicing the discipline of prayer, and in the journey, our prayers are refined.
* God refines our calling, our mission. This can happen to us as individuals and it certainly can happen to us as the people of God gathered together in the community we call St. Ambrose.

What’s true, also, is that I don’t begin to know all the ways that God might want to refine us! But if you feel like you are being worked on from the inside out, and you have a sneaking suspicion that, though what you are going through is painful and challenging, it is also for your own sanctification, then there is a really good chance that you are in God’s refining fire.

GOOD NEWS - What the baptism of the Spirit does

The baptism that Jesus brings - the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire - does all those things we talked about in the beginning of this sermon.

It warms us - though from the inside - and gives us a passion for God’s will and God’s kingdom

It consumes the parts of us that are no longer needed, the things that are holding us back from full-blown love.

This fire provides a lamp unto or feet and a light unto our path, for it is the fire of God’s guidance.

The fire of our baptism definitely renews us; it sets us on a new course and a whole new way of living.

And the fire of our baptism keeps refining us, so that - over time - we are made more into the likeness of Christ.

And so it is that Luke writes, immediately after writing that “the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”, “So, with many other exhortations, he [John] proclaimed the good news to the people.” (Luke 3:18)

It is good news for all of us - this news about being baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

NEW BEHAVIOR

The fire of God warms us and gives us purpose, provides light for our path, refines and purifies us, consumes us, and renews us.

And when we allow this fire to work on us, our behavior changes. We learn something about how to rejoice in the Lord always. We learn something about how to turn our worries into prayers and supplications and thanksgivings.

We learn something about the power of God’s peace, that unique peace that is freely offered to us. And we learn how to share, how to love, how to treat others with respect, and how to work for justice.

CONCLUSION

The Lord came to communicate to us how much we are loved by God. And… the Lord came to refine us, to work on us in such a way that we become more fully the people that God created us to be.

So… how is God refining you right now?