

God is a Fire

Ex. 13:21,22, Ex.40:38, Lev.6:12,13, Luke 3:15-17, Acts 2:1-3

First Advent, November 28/21 by Patty Friesen

First Advent is the beginning of the new church year with our lectionary readings from the Gospel of Luke - so Happy New Year! Fire has been a special comfort to us all these past months gathering safely outdoors in all seasons with folks around a fire in someone's backyard or at a campground. The warmth, the crackle and sizzle, the mesmerizing calming feel of feeding a fire with twigs and then branches to get it started and then split pieces that coax it into a roar. Fire can be a comfort if it is controlled but it also has great destructive powers as we have seen in this summer's forest fires in BC and California.

"God is a Fire," declares Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler in her new book *Fire by Night: Finding God in the pages of the Old Testament*. She says, "As a fire, God is unwieldy and uncontrollable, common and extraordinary, making light and revealing hidden places, burning up and burning away. The Old Testament smells like smoke." (p. 18) Florer-Bixler redeems many Old Testament images of God for me these days including the images of God as fire as we have heard in our Old and New Testament passages this morning. God the Fire, led the children of Israel in dark nights, protecting and guiding them and commanded them to keep the altar fires going continuously as a reminder of the God-Fire that blazed with awe and wonder.

From the Old Testament images of God as comforting and consuming Fire to the Gospel reading, John the Baptist declares that the One to come "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v. 16). The reference to fire parallels Luke's other description of

the Spirit's coming in Acts 2 which he also wrote. What is the relationship between Spirit and fire? Fire describes the inflaming, purifying work of the Spirit; and "Spirit" or "wind" and "fire" reflect the Christian interpretation of the Pentecost experience of purification and the birth of the church. The double proclamation of purification continues in v. 17. At the harvest, grain was gathered to a threshing floor, where the farmer would pitch the grain into the air with a winnowing fork. The wind would blow away the lighter chaff, but the grain itself would fall back to the floor where it could be gathered for use. In the picture painted by this saying, the separation has already taken place and the farmer is at the point of gathering the grain into the granary and burning the chaff.

As a modern reader of scripture, I don't like these fiery apocalyptic passages on the First Sunday of Advent. Why bother with the doom and gloom prophets? Why don't we go straight to baby Jesus - that's the whole point of this Advent season isn't it - preparation for a baby? But this approach is exactly what Advent texts warn us against, says Canadian Mennonite University Professor Chris Huebner in last week's Canadian Mennonite.

"We think we know what kind of Messiah is coming but we cannot. We cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of preparation and expectation in terms of one coming who is *known* in advance of his arrival. We cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of the Messiah as someone we will surely *recognize*. And we cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of Advent as preparing for something that we are striving for, a longing for something that we are responsible to bring about.

The Advent texts plead with the God of Fire not to be angry—even though God has every right to be angry. The psalmist asks, “O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?” (80:4). Isaiah appeals to God: “Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever” (64:9). These texts involve confession: “We have sinned.” They turn on a recognition of Israel’s transgression and need for restoration.

Why are the people in need of restoration? Why is God angry? Why are the people of Israel in need of restoration? They need restoration because they have taken their future into their own hands. They have tried to reach God. They have become impatient. They have forgotten that their very existence rests on their being chosen, called out from the nations. They have forgotten that God comes to God’s people, not the other way around. They have, in short, failed to let God be God.

Isaiah is clear about this reality. He emphasizes the fact that God arrives in ways we do not expect: “When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait” (64:3-4).

God’s deeds are unexpected. When we try to see or hear God, we can be confident that it is not God whom we will see or hear. This is why we are to wait for God to come to us: If we rush to meet God, we invariably find something other than God.

As we enter into the time of expectation that is Advent, we are confronted with our sinfulness: We yearn for a messiah whom we will recognize. We want a messiah who reflects what we would identify as best about ourselves. We long for a messiah

who seems familiar, someone we feel like we know. But Advent biblical passages seem to cut in the opposite direction. This is why Advent is dangerous: It all too easily turns into a longing for and anticipation of the Jesus we think we've got figured out. It is exactly for this reason that we are called to beware, remain watchful and keep alert. We tend to think of Advent as a time when we gradually come closer to God, a God who comes to us in human form in Jesus. But Advent begins by confronting us with the anger of God. If these passages underscore anything, it is God's distance or difference from us. The emphasis is not on a God with whom we are becoming increasingly familiar, but on a God who remains exceedingly strange.

Advent brings us face to face with our insatiable desire to erect idols. It reminds us that our expectations will not be straightforwardly satisfied; we will not get the messiah we think we are waiting for. It emphasizes that God remains beyond our knowledge. It reflects a longing that in some sense remains frustrated and endlessly deferred. The Scriptures suggest that God is not something we reach, even when we do our best to get things right, even when we strive to be our holiest. Rather, the idea of the messianic is that God comes to us—and, in so doing, radically transforms our way of being and thinking. Here Advent names a divine movement that interrupts and reorients us. If it names an expectation, it is of an event that will be explosive and disruptive—and thus profoundly unexpected.

How do we prepare for this kind of Advent? An Advent like this seems to require a change in how we think about preparation. We often think of preparation as a gradual filling up, a process of addition or accumulation, a progressive unfolding that moves ever forward. Here is a different image of preparation. It is not so much a filling up, as

an emptying. It is a matter not of addition, but of subtraction. It is a negative moment more than one that is positive or progressive, because the Messiah comes as much to defy our expectations as to satisfy them.

North American Christians tend to approach Advent from the perspective of Christmas. We think that the point of Advent is to focus our gaze on the event of Jesus' arrival. This is no doubt because our lives are governed so much by metaphors of progress and accumulation. But Advent ceases to be Advent when it is overdetermined by Christmas; the meaning of Advent requires us to turn our gaze the other way around. The peculiarly Jewish character of Advent that we are wont to forget reminds us that we must unlearn the Jesus we think we know so that Jesus can come to us as Messiah.

The season of Advent has as much to do with the Second Coming of Jesus as with his birth in Bethlehem. Let us reimagine Advent as a kind of self-emptying, a hollowing out, so that we can become ready to receive the gift that Christmas has to give—the unexpected gift of a Messiah who comes to save us from the temptation that we must somehow save ourselves. (Canadian Mennonite, Nov. 8/21, p. 4-6)

I like to use art as sermon illustrations during Advent because Advent gives us strong metaphorical subjects that are best got at through art. This is a recent piece by Tree Bird called Growth. In our artist interview Tree said, "It begins with fire, a strong red and yellow base over the canvas and reading it from left to right, it begins with a burst of sparkly paint that is sprinkled throughout the growth stages of the young tree. The tree grows up buffeted by storms but not broken. The tree grows strong and flourishes in the last third of the painting. Its branches spread and provide cover and protection for all kinds of birds (Birds) and people in her work in spiritual healing in-

person and on Facebook. On the far right, the tree is obscured as the story isn't finished yet - what lies ahead for the tree is to be revealed. The painting is sprinkled with stardust in each stage of growth and is drawn up the inside of the trunk of the present day tree along with red fire being drawn up from the roots. It pulses with energy and thick swatches of paint. You can come up after the service for a closer look if you dare!

Art is a medium for trying to express our spiritual and life religious experiences. John the Baptist points to a religious experience that is beyond our control. Because it arises from a responsiveness to what God is doing among us, such experience cannot be channeled or domesticated to our tastes. Here is the mystery: God acts among us in ways that defy explanation or institutionalization. God calls for a genuine turning of heart and a commitment to the life-style of a covenant people. Our experience of God is always Spirit and fire, ongoing goodness and growth and revelation.

I invite you to follow God as Israel followed through the dark, God the Fire lighting the way. I invite you to keep the fires of your heart for God continuously burning as the priests stoked the fires of the altar in the tabernacle. I invite you to let the Spirit burn the excess chaff of possessions or resentments in our lives that clutter our path to following Jesus. Let us pray...

Holy One, untamed as fire, let us trust the love you have for us through all the seasons of our growth and in this advent season especially. Help us live out our passion and callings and love with all in your human family. Amen.