

December 13, 2015 "The Fire of God"
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

Luke 3:7-18
Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

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Our Advent theme this year is "What are we waiting for?"

Here's a little story for you.... a take on a Christmas theme...

A young Pastor, named Joshua, now in his early 30s, remembered how, when he was 8 or so, was tremendously anxious for a Transformers action figure for Christmas. His parents had a rule that he couldn't get out of bed until 6 a.m. to wake them up and open presents. But little Joshua couldn't stand it, so at 5 a.m. he snuck down to the tree to have a look.

He remembered how beautiful the tree was, all lit up, with presents underneath. Some were obviously socks and underwear, but one looked promising and was marked with, "To Joshua."

Against his better judgment, he peeled back a little bit of the wrapping paper and saw he that it was a 'Decepticon' (it's a Transformers thing), just as he had wished for.

Thrilled, he put the wrapping paper back in place and snuck back upstairs. Then, about an hour later, he woke up his parents and headed downstairs. Much to all their surprise, they saw a tree with no presents at all underneath, with a note from Santa that explained that, because Joshua had peeked at his toy, Santa had taken back all the gifts.

Rev. Josh said that he had never cried so hard in his entire life. His parents didn't know what to think.

It turned out it was a prank by Josh's older brother, who had gotten up right after Josh, seen him peeking and then, after the coast was clear, hid all the presents. The presents soon came back out.

Rev. Josh remarked: "The unfortunate end of that story is that we haven't seen my brother Mark since."

Rev. Josh now uses the story to explain that, during Advent, Christians wait in eager anticipation of the gift of Christmas: Jesus' birth. But unlike wrapped up toys, it's OK to take a sneak peek.

That's because God "wants us to anticipate. Because we will be receiving a present that will never be taken away from us."

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In Advent, we're not presented with a 'bait-and-switch.' There is no threat of Christmas not happening, or more importantly, of God's love for us ever to be taken away.

At the same time, if your only source of Advent information comes from our scripture lesson for this morning, John the Baptist, you might not be aware of the present that God offers us at Christmas.

John the Baptist was not out to attract random onlookers or to read the tea leaves of the popularity ratings, but rather to test, try and purify those who were ready and willing to radically change their lives and follow him.

His reference to the Baptism that Jesus would bring combines both the power of the Holy Spirit and the fire that will burn off the chaff, the now useless, non-essential parts of who we are, that we can be fit and ready for the next steps God has in mind for us.

The Judgment must come, says John, which is only good news in that sense that after judgment comes the kingdom of God. After threshing and burning, the wheat is gathered, after repentance comes forgiveness: - after death comes resurrection.

And this is the good news we celebrate- not just the end of the process, but the beginning & middle, too. The story is told and retold in more ways than we are aware.

Our popular celebrations of Christmas explore this theme in more ways than we realize in the familiar stories of the season told through literature and film.

The path toward Christmas is never straight. Obstacles always appear, disappointments always occur; it always looks darkest before the dawn—which is all another way of saying that some ‘purging’ needs to take place before we’re ever really ready to receive the good news; to be in a position to realize that we really do need God’s good news, love and forgiveness to help make us right.

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George MacDonald, a 19th century Scottish Pastor, author and poet, was a fertile mind who dabbled in the in the field of fantasy literature and became the mentor of the English writer C.S.Lewis. He once described the ‘fire of God’ in a unique, thoughtful and creative way, more Biblical than physical, more theological than chemical. He wrote that the ‘fire of God’- the creative, essential being of God, God’s creative power, is unlike the earthly form of fire, in that it is only at a distance that the fire burns hot: that the farther you are from God, the hotter it gets, it burns the worse, and that whenever we turn and begin to approach God, the burning begins to change to comfort, and the comfort will grow to bliss, and that then the heart will cry out with a gladness that no other gladness can reach. (Christ in Creation)

This works itself out in the stories we tell through the Christmas season in ways more familiar than you know; when in film and story the plot reaches a low point that can only get better, not worse. You know these examples well.

Charles Dickens’ “Christmas Carol” explores how it is that Ebenezer Scrooge, after exhibiting all the meanness he can muster, finally sees himself reflected in the fragile and vulnerable Tiny Tim, a boy whose loving heart wins his Christmas present; and is then himself remade into a child of God.

George Bailey, in the movie ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’, a kind man who is overwhelmed on one disastrous day, learns to see all that has meant to others, how he has helped them to stay afloat and remain caring and human, and is saved from doing himself in on a very desperate Christmas Eve. Even the greedy banker, Mr. Potter, has his heart turned to gold. But it doesn’t happen until after things have turned their worst.

For the Grinch, it is being given a gift by an innocent and generous child that warms his frozen heart and allows it to grow and beat hard and strong; only then does the transformed Grinch know and share the real meaning of Christmas.

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Today we are given our first gift of Christmas; unwrapped and ready. It begins with an invitation, moves into a meal and leads to our living with the message of God inside us. It asks us to come closer to God, to receive the comfort only God has in store for us, aware that the challenges of the world around us will test and try us. In the bread and the cup, the signs and

seals of Jesus' everlasting and undying covenant with us, we are given all that we need to warm our hearts, renew our faith and join us, one with each other, in the wondrous journey God in Christ has set out for us to travel; in Jesus' name. Amen.