

12/16/18

Luke 3:7-18

Pastor Lauren Dow Wegner

Wednesday, December 5, 2018.

7:13pm.

The moment when those of us up here in the chancel
began looking for a fire extinguisher.

The gathered assembly for our first Advent midweek evening
worship service had all carried lighted candles into the sanctuary--

All part of our worship plan.

And these candles were then placed in wooden
sandboxes that flanked the chancel.

It created a beautiful array of light, really.

Many more candles than we had anticipated,

With school choirs and families here that evening.

So the candles kept coming,

And the fire in those boxes grew larger.

As candles sunk ever more deeply into the sand,

Their individual flames at times looked to be combining into
one large flame,

Sinking toward the untreated wood that held them.

The message for us that evening was one of stillness and
expectation. . .

The stillness was really everyone's eyes trained on the
mass of fire in front of them,

The expectation was really that this would go
down in history as the day that Grace church
was set on fire in worship!

Thankfully, Pastor Dave and Pastor Lyle quickly and deftly rose
from their seats,

And blew out all those candles before the fire enveloped the boxes.

I'm honestly not sure anyone really heard my homily that evening,

And that's okay,

Because there was fire to look at--

There was fire to watch,

And to see what it would do next.

We gather on this Third Sunday of Advent,

With fire that has grown steadily each week as we have lighted candles in that wreath,

Marking the light of Christ that is coming,

The light that dispels our darkness.

The season of Advent is marked with burning flame.

And this morning,

We hear John the Baptist speak of flames.

John notes how fire will burn away the trees that do not bear good fruit,

And fire will burn the chaff.

Now, this kind of burning is typical for agriculture.

If a tree is bearing bad fruit,

It's not going to be harvested;

And it may not be given many more chances before it is destroyed.

Chaff is the dry husk of a ripe grain seed.

Threshing and winnowing are processes by which those husks are separated and removed from the ripe seeds.

The chaff is no longer useful once the seed is ripe and ready to be eaten or otherwise processed.

The chaff is destroyed.

John's point is that that which does not have any usefulness--

The bad, rotten fruit,

The dry, old shells of the seed--

These are tossed into the fire,

And they are consumed by that fire,

Charred and turned to ashes.

The Messiah comes to burn away useless ways and dead things.

The useless,

Rotten,

Old,

Sinful ways in us--

For we certainly bear plenty of bad fruit,

And dried-up chaff:

To use John's examples,

When we have two coats,

Well, we want to keep both of them.

When we have more than enough food to eat,

Well, we buy even more.

All of John's teachings of how to bear good fruit,

revolve around having just enough for ourselves. . .

And sharing any more than that with those who don't have enough for themselves.

Jesus comes to burn away all that keeps us from bearing good fruit.

John reminds us of that as we prepare for this Messiah--

Because he's not a Messiah who is confined to the small candle flames we light.

He's a Messiah whose love and mercy set ablaze the world.

He's not a Messiah who puts out the fires.

He's a Messiah who sets fire to things that need to be gone,

Done,

Dead.

Jesus comes to burn away useless ways and dead things.

And in this same blaze of light,

The same fire that obliterates that which is useless and dead in us,

Jesus lights our hearts on fire in faith,

And for others.

John makes a distinction between the baptism with which he baptizes,

And the baptism Jesus brings.

While John baptizes with water,

Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And this fire scorches our sin,

And it also ignites the holy,
Good- fruit-bearing work of our lives.
This fire destroys death,
And it also sparks the seed of faith in our hearts and
into action.
In and through Jesus' death and resurrection,
In baptism,
Jesus burns us.
And Jesus ignites us.

As we gather at this Table and receive the bread and wine,
Jesus' body and blood,
Our bad fruit is redeemed by the good fruit of the Living
Vine.
The dry, dead chaff in us is redeemed by the
grains of Living Bread.
The fire of faith within us is fed and stoked here,
Flames are fanned we thought had gone out.

As we watch the light grow in that wreath this Advent,
As we watched the light grow in the candle boxes a couple
of weeks ago,
There's a mix of wonder and awe,
Fear and uncertainty over what fire can do.
We feel the same way about what Jesus can do--
The ways Jesus will change us,
The ways Jesus will use us.
As the light and the fire grow this Advent,

Feel the newness of life in Christ.

Feel the opening of your heart toward others.

Feel the Messiah's presence,

And feel the burn.