

Sermon for 2 Advent A
Dec. 4, 2022
St. John's, Gloucester
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“(The one who is coming) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Hmm. Well, that doesn't sound so great! I mean, who would WANT to meet this coming person?

Last week, I talked about home being WHO, and about Jesus being the One who sets our relationships right. Part of setting relationships right is having the parts that are false, harmful, or inessential burned off or transformed. So yes, we might very well need to meet the one who brings the Holy Spirit and fire; to subject us, our relationships and our systems to his fiery presence.

And it seems to me that one way of interpreting the “fire” is seeing it as the Truth. Truth is that which cuts through falsehood and illusion and oversimplification and superficiality. Those are the things that keep us from real relationship, because they also tend to shield us from pain. Truth brings pain. But it brings freedom and health.

Yesterday I met a college friend I haven't seen in over 30 years. That was weird and wonderful. Trying to explain to someone what your life have been like over all that time! And we were pondering decisions we've made and who and what we “could have been,” had we made different choices. In the course of the conversation, she mentioned a friend of hers, a journalist who had recently and abruptly quit her life-long career.

Apparently the woman had lived in Kiev for a number of years, and after Ukraine was invaded by Russia this year, she decided to set up a symposium for journalists in Ukraine. She laid the groundwork for it, and got funding for the project. However, she found out that the money that had been sent to the university in Ukraine earmarked for the symposium had been diverted to other uses. She was a journalist; she wrote about and revealed the university's dishonesty and mishandling of the money, and was vilified from every side for speaking up.

Talking with my friend, she lamented her decision. “I made the wrong decision,” she said. My friend responded, “How is that? You can't be two people at the same time. You are a journalist who has always been passionate about revealing the truth. How could you possibly have been that same person and also one who stood by and said nothing?”

The Truth is fire that cuts away illusion and falsehood. And it hurts. It is costly. People who are part of corrupt systems do not want others speaking up and pointing out the truth. They will react swiftly and mercilessly to attack and discredit the truth-teller and to protect the false narrative. This woman suffered so much from her witness to the truth that she finally gave up and left her profession.

But she also needed a little fiery truth herself. She was perhaps left with the illusion that she could have still been herself but made a different decision—one that would have shielded her from all that pain and the end of her career. But as my friend gently pointed out, for her to have made a different decision, she would have had to let go of everything that was dear and essential to herself. No, the truth is, painful as it was, she made the decision she did because THAT'S WHO SHE IS. And yes, it was costly. But more costly would have been the decision she didn't make, which would have compromised her essential being, her integrity. Jesus knows that about us. He knows all about the cost of saying and being the truth. He comes to bring the truth to us.

What is the fiery truth that we need in our lives and in our relationships? A good place to start is anywhere there is pain, anger, resentment, sorrow or guilt. Especially if any of these have lived in you for a long time. Something you've never resolved, that still rears its ugly head when you're stressed. This will mess up your sense of peace and your ability to have right relationship with others. Most of us have lived a long time, so most of us may have several deep wounds that need the healing fire of truth. There are many forms of this truth, but one that has been helpful to me is the mantra: "I did the best I could at the time." And maybe that best wasn't very good, but it was all I could manage at the time.

And I want to suggest a practice that a spiritual director once led me through. When I am deeply distressed, particularly when I am afraid of being left or left out, I revert to being two years old. That is because my mother died when I was 2 ½. And, as we all know, two-year-olds think they are immensely powerful, so of course my mother died because I was not a good child. As an adult and a mother of toddlers, I came upon a picture of myself and my twin brother. It must have been near our second birthday, because I have a band-aid on my arm from a vaccination shot. We are sitting on the stairs in front of our house, and we look sad. Our mom, Ruth, was in the hospital at that point, one of several times before she died.

I described this picture to my spiritual director with all its associated feelings. As a mother myself, I could understand more clearly what the absence of a parent would mean to young children. My director invited me into a practice of imagination. She asked me to close my eyes, breathe deeply, feel settled. Then she invited me to imagine myself as that two-year-old, sitting on the front step next to my brother. What would I be feeling? What would it be like? And then she asked me to imagine Jesus in this picture. Where would he be? What would he look like? What would he do? What would he say? How did I feel when I realized he was there? We stayed with the practice for a few minutes, and then she led me out of the exercise.

Through this practice, my spiritual director invited the fiery truth of Jesus to be present to me in a very tender place. My chief worry has always been about abandonment, but in that exercise I could see the truth—Jesus has always been present and has never ever abandoned me. Jesus had always been present to this whole suffering family. And no, I was not in any way responsible for my mother's death, which seems obvious intellectually, but not emotionally. I knew that I was a beloved child, as are all children of God.

Perhaps this practice could be helpful to you. If you decide to try it about an event or relationship from your past, I suggest you have a trusted friend or spiritual guide walk with you through it. Perhaps when you know that Jesus was there, you will come to a new truth about yourself and about that event.

What is the truth that you need, in order to free you up to deeper relationship, more life and health? And if you've done a lot of your personal work, you can always work on the truth about racism, empire, and climate destruction that we're all part of and need to be constantly attending to as well. We will never exhaust our need for God's truth in our lives! So let us ask for Jesus to come—bring on the Holy Spirit and fire!! Come, Lord Jesus, Come. Amen.