

**A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on  
December 4, 2022**

### **THE MEANING OF BAPTISM BY FIRE**

***I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Matthew 3:11***

The Gospel lesson on each Second Sunday in Advent presents us with the strange figure of John the Baptist. John is that ascetic cousin of Jesus who has an unusual wardrobe and diet, clothes of camel's hair and eating locusts. John comes from the desert preaching a strong message in very unsettling images. One of those difficult images is John saying that Jesus was coming to baptize with fire. This morning I would like us to ponder the meaning of a baptism of fire.

Let me begin with a story. One of Grimm's Fairy Tales includes the tale of a competition between a huge giant and a small tailor to prove who is the strongest. The giant took a stone and threw it into the air. He threw it so high that it took a long, long time before it came down to earth. The diminutive tailor then stepped forward. He moved his arm forward and released a bird. The bird flew away and did not come down at all.

Christians understand that those who strive to become better people merely under their own strength are like the giant. We may be able to make great improvements in our behavior and character, but, like the stone thrown by the giant, we are bound to earth. The power of the tailor comes from another source. His strength comes from outside himself. I believe this simple story teaches us that it is only through the power of God that radical transformation is possible.

This tale illustrates the same point that John the Baptist makes in our Gospel Lesson. John tells us that there is a difference between the change that human beings can bring in their own lives and the radical change that Jesus can bring. John says that while he baptizes with water, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Jesus comes with the power to change our lives. John calls on us to repent by which he means to change the direction of our lives. John's call to repentance must be accomplished under our own power. But John says there is one whose coming can transform our lives. John says he will baptize with water. Water is able to cleanse the outside of a person, but Jesus will baptize with fire. This fire causes inner transformation.

When we hear the word fire our first thoughts are of destruction. We conjure up images of a building burning to the ground or forest fires bringing havoc out west. For us fire usually symbolizes something negative. Thus, the image of Jesus coming to baptize with fire can make him seem like an avenging super-hero out of a comic book. When we read or hear this passage it can be off-putting because we do not usually associate Jesus with destruction.

It may be helpful to learn there are other meanings associated with fire. Fire not only destroys, it can also refine. Many metals are made pure by fire. The fire helps to remove that which is impure. It burns off the debased metal leaving the pure behind. John the Baptist is telling us that the fire of Jesus' love can radically transform us. The love of Christ can work fundamental change in our lives. Jesus can make us better people.

That is all well and good to say, but how does it work in our everyday lives? How does this refining process take place?

It begins with the fire of Christ's love revealing our impurities to us. It is easy for us to ignore our imperfections and failings as human beings. If we compare ourselves to most of the people around us, we can be fairly satisfied with ourselves. After all we are not such a bad people. We know that we have faults and failures and weaknesses, but they are not as bad as many people we know. We can always find people to compare ourselves with who are much worse than us. We just listen to crime stories in the news and we can feel that we are not so bad.

But when I begin to compare my life to the love shown by Christ, then my failures and shortcomings become clear. If I judge my actions, motives and thoughts against the example of Jesus, the need for change becomes very apparent.

Have you ever noticed how clean your windows look at night? If you look out through them on a moonlit night they seem fine. They also appear to be perfectly clear on a gray overcast day. Several months ago, we had a beautiful, sunny, Sunday morning. The sun was pouring through the windows of our Sanctuary, we could see every spot of dirt, every smudge, every imperfection. We thank the Loose Screws who got on the job to clean them.

The fire of Christ's love brings light to our lives; it reveals the reality of who we are.

Thus, the fire of Christ's love can be painful for it forces us to see ourselves as we really are. We can see the reality of sin in our lives. We recognize our shortcomings.

It is important how we react to this truth. We can make the mistake of believing that we have the power to fundamentally change. We can become frustrated if we seek to make ourselves more like Christ. You and I cannot become better human beings under our own effort. The giant could throw the stone harder and harder, but no matter how hard he tried the stone would come back down to earth.

If we think we are going to radically change ourselves by human effort we are mistaken. We can make marginal changes in our lives, but real fundamental change comes not from our own power, but rather from the love of Christ.

Indeed, we come to see that we are powerless to change ourselves. We come to understand we cannot radically transform ourselves under our own power.

The fire of Christ's love first reveals our impurities. It then can begin to refine us. When the love of Christ dwells within us, it can radically change who we are.

This last week we have been inundated with news of the World Cup. Every four years teams from all over the world gather to compete for what the world calls football's, biggest crown. They have spent many hours training for the event. They jog long distances to build endurance. They run wind sprints to improve their speed. They lift weights to increase their strength. They do many other exercises as a part of the rigorous training program. They spend hours on the fields in drills.

These athletes do not go through the sacrifice and pain of training merely to be in great physical shape. No, they want to be in top condition in order to beat their competition. They gain motivation to train from the desire for victory.

Real change in our lives comes not when we want to be better people, but rather when we have a great desire to experience the love of God.

Dante, the writer of *The Divine Comedy*, learned that love could change one's life. He tells us that in his youth he met a girl named Beatrice at a party and was absolutely dumbstruck. Her beauty seemed to radiate perfection. Some years later as a young man he saw Beatrice walking down the street and had the same experience. He tells us that he was so completely full of love that if anyone had injured him he could not help but forgive him or her. This euphoria of love gradually faded away within a few days.

There is nothing particularly special about Dante's experience of falling in love romantically. But Dante did something with his experience. For him this experience showed him what the goal of his life ought to be. Dante wanted to be so filled with the love of Christ that he would always be able to love his neighbor. He realized that the power to love one's neighbor did not come from trying to love them. No, the ability to love others came from knowing the love of God which overflowed to others.

Real change in our behavior and hearts is possible when the love of Jesus dwells in us. We will not change just because we want to change; we will be changed by the presence of Christ.

We receive this love into our hearts merely by saying yes to Christ. We say yes to the good that God would do us. We begin by admitting that we are powerless to change ourselves. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much effort we put into being better people, our attempts are doomed to failure.

We need a power outside ourselves. That power is the burning love of the living Christ. We find that powerful love when we ponder the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. John the Baptist promised that one was coming who could baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire. He pointed to Jesus whose death on the cross would be a demonstration of the love God has for us.

The great poet George Herbert wrote a long poem reflecting on the love of Christ on the Cross. His poem is called *The Sacrifice*. In this poem Herbert retells the story of Jesus' Passion. In beautiful words he gives us a portrayal of Christ's sacred suffering love for us.

In one section of the poem Jesus is being accused by some in the crowd. His response in Herbert's words was:

**I answer nothing, but with patience prove  
If stony hearts will melt with gentle love.**

The fire of Jesus' love can melt the hardness of our hearts and recast our lives into a mold of his design.

Friends, real change in our lives is possible.  
If we hunger for the presence of Christ,  
If we read the Scriptures seeking knowledge of the Risen Christ.  
If we give ourselves in prayer wanting to hear God's voice.  
If we meditate on beauty hoping to experience Jesus' presence  
the fire of God's love will begin to work in our hearts.

May we seek to become better men and women,  
not through schemes of self-improvement,  
but rather by hungering and thirsting for the love of Jesus.

The love of Christ offers radical transformation.  
The burning fire of God's love burns away all that is impure.  
The warming fire of Jesus' love melts cold hearts.  
The fiery light of God's presence will guide our steps into the future.

You and I can become new people,  
real change in our lives is possible,  
but only when we allow the purifying fire of Christ's love to dwell in us.

**I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**