

Second Sunday in Advent
“Fruits of repentance from the Fire of the Gospel” Luke 3:16-17
December 8, 2024
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for the Second Sunday in Advent is from our Gospel reading, Luke 3:16-17.

“John answered, saying to all, “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So far the text...

Was there a word in the text that I just read that you also heard in the other readings of today...in the Old Testament reading of Malachi 3 and and Psalm 66? How about the word “fire”? Do you associate the word “fire” with the season of Advent? Today, I’d like us to think about three ways that fire is physically and symbolically used in the Bible – as a purifier, as a destroyer, and as a comforter of the presence of God.

First, a purifier...And so we heard very clearly in our Old Testament reading from Malachi 3 these words:

“Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts.

2 “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like launderers’ soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness.”

Any metallurgists here today? God gives us a quick lesson in metallurgy. If one wants pure gold or silver, it has to be refined in fire. The gold is heated up with fire, and the impurities began to melt and turn into liquid because they have a lower melting point. All the tin, copper, nickel, all the oxides and unwanted metals form a scummy liquid that floats called dross. That is separated leaving the pure gold or silver.

What is the dross? It's our sins. How does God refine and purge us? Through the message of John the Baptist who is prophesied of here in the Malachi 3.

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.”

Well, Advent has sometimes been called the “little Lent”. Why? Because it is a season to slow down, reflect and as John the Baptist said, “repent”. Matthew 3, our Gospel parallel says, **“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”**

One prepares for the coming of Jesus by repenting, confessing one's sins and receiving the complete forgiveness of one's sins in the cleansing waters of baptism. The dross of our sins is removed in our baptism so that our offerings, our fruits of faith are righteous. The fire of the Gospel purifies us for it gives us the righteousness of Christ in our stead.

This is what we heard last Sunday from our Old Testament reading in Jeremiah 33, right?

“15 ‘In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. 16 In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely. And this is the name by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.’”

From our Gospel we heard John calling for repentance. **“went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins”** and to **“bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”**

This, of course, is all God's work 100%. He creates faith and He refines it by the power of the Holy Spirit with fire – that is the fire of the Gospel. As our epistle reading from Philippians tells.

“5 for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;”

The message of the Bible is very simple. Through the Holy Spirit's creating work, our Heavenly Father gives to us His gifts of forgiveness through Jesus' redeeming work on the cross. Ephesians 4 tells of the work of the Triune God.

“4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

There are not two Lords or two faiths or two baptisms, but one. John's baptism was no different from our baptism. It was a baptism with water for the forgiveness of sins. In it the purifying fire of the Gospel cleansed the soul and presented it righteous before God to then produce fruits of such a cleansing of repentance! The only difference between John's baptism and ours was that he baptized before Jesus publicly manifested Himself.

Why is this important? Because all non-Lutheran commentaries talk of John's baptism as only preparatory, as only an outward symbol. How could John tell the people to change their lives, you know, give a tunic or food to those in need, or don't commit fraud or overcharge, if a person does not have the power to do so by the Holy Spirit given in baptism? It's impossible for man but not for God.

So also, the Council of Trent damned anyone who said that the baptism of John has equal efficacy to that of Jesus. So, Lutherans are very much the only ones to understand John's baptism correctly.

So Christians thank God for His cleansing of our souls through baptism which continually washes us of our sin. As our Psalm 66 from today tells us, that it is for our good that God continually refines us through our confession of sins and absolution of them. For by it, God brings us to a rich fulfillment.

**“Oh, bless our God, you peoples! And make the voice of His praise to be heard,
9 Who keeps our soul among the living, And does not allow our feet to be moved.
10 For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined.
11 You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs.
12 You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment.”**

If one doesn't receive the baptism of John with all its cleansing power, well then one has to stand before God with all of one's dross. And then we see God use fire to destroy. We see the destructive power of fire. This is a second way that fire is used in the Bible.

“17 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

God gathers His believers in Jesus to heaven, but the unbelievers are destroyed. Again, the prophet Malachi continues in the next chapter from our Old Testament reading with these words of judgement.

“For behold, the day is coming, Burning like an oven, And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,” Says the Lord of hosts, “That will leave them neither root nor branch.”

Yes, God is a consuming fire as Hebrews 12:29 tells us. But, for those who believe in Him, one does not fear God's consuming fire for Malachi 4 tells us.

“But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves. 3 You shall trample the wicked, For they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet.”

Which brings us to a third way that the Bible uses fire. For God Himself is pictured as fire. The second person of the Trinity, spoke to Moses in a burning bush. He led the Israelites as a pillar of fire at night. The Holy Spirit showed His presence on Pentecost as tongues of fire upon the disciples. Fire gives light. Fire gives warmth. The fire of the Gospel gives us the Light of Jesus who is the Light of the world.

Fire is a comfort that God is always with us, forgiving us and finishing what He has begun...until He takes us to the new heavens and new earth on the last day. For the old has passed away by fire. We look forward to the final coming of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit prepares us through His Word and Sacraments with the fire of the Gospel. We receive forgiveness in our baptisms daily and receive the body and blood of Jesus for our remission of sins. And so the Holy Spirit actively prepares us to produce more fruits of repentance.

Martin Luther captured this truth so beautifully in the 3rd stanza of our hymn of the day, “Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord”.

“Come, holy Fire, comfort true, Grant us the will Your work to do And in Your service to abide; Let trials turn us not aside. Lord, by Your pow’r prepare each heart, And to our weakness strength impart That bravely here we may contend, Through life and death to You, our Lord, ascend. Alleluia, alleluia!”

Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)