

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**C: Tenth Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 20 / Proper 15
Luke 12:49-56, Jeremiah 23:23-29**

**14 August 2022
Salem, Bridgeport**

“The Fire Jesus Brings”

“Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”

So says God through the prophet Jeremiah in our reading from the Hebrew scriptures today.
And in our gospel, Jesus says,

*“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!
I have a baptism with which to be baptized...”*

So today we’re going to talk about fire.

Fire can be good or bad.

Fire can warm us – or burn us.

Fire can cook our food – or burn it beyond recognition.

Fire can provide light – or its smoke can blind us.

And fire in the Bible can also be good or bad.

There are many references like today’s where the fire of God is a fearsome thing.

Not only is there the threat of fire, but stories of when such threats were carried out.

Fire fell from heaven and destroyed Job’s flocks.

Fire and brimstone rained down from heaven and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

There are stories where fire meant destruction for some but not for all

There was the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal

to see who could call down God’s fire on heaven to light a sacrifice on an altar,

and while Baal’s prophets failed, Elijah called down so much fire

it consumed not only the sacrifice but the altar,

plus every drop of water that Elijah had previously poured over everything. .

There was the time that King Nebuchadnesszar threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego
into the fiery furnace, and yet they were not touched by the flames.

There are other references in which fire is a sign of God’s presence.

God appeared to Moses in a burning bush.

God led the people of Israel through the desert by a pillar of fire by night.

John the Baptist said that he baptized with water

but the one coming after him – Jesus – would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire!

And then, on Pentecost, tongues of fire appeared among the apostles and rested upon them
and they began speaking in tongues.

But what does this mean for our lives?

What does baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire mean to you and to me?

Well that’s probably an entire semester’s course, so today we’re going to make it simple.

We’re simply going to reflect on the symbolic ways

that God can use the Holy Spirit and fire in our lives today.

First, fire can destroy, but destruction is not always a bad thing.

Preventing all forest fires is not always a good thing.

If you prevent all the small fires that occur as part of nature's cycle,
then the underbrush can build up to such an extent that,
when fire does strike, it will cause massive destruction.

Forestry experts will also point out that fires are necessary for the effective reproduction of many trees.
Without fire the undergrowth will choke out new seedlings, & so without fire, the forest is not renewed.

So what I'd like you all to do is to reflect on the things in your life that are in the way,

and that may be keeping you from being and doing all that God has called you to be and do.

What would you like God to burn up in your life so that you can be healthier in body, mind and spirit?

Maybe it's physical illness you'd like God to burn away.

Maybe it's hate, or unforgiveness, or thoughts of vengeance or judgment.

Maybe it's bitterness or disappointment or grief or sadness. Maybe it's depression or despair or guilt.

Maybe it's impatience or doubt or fear or anxiety.

Maybe it's conflict within yourself, or between you and others.

Maybe it's arrogance and self-righteousness or self-centeredness or selfishness.

Whatever it is that you would like God's fire to burn away, write it down on the orange paper.

The second thing that fire can do is to provide light.

So now take the yellow sheet and write down on that what it is

that you would like God to enlighten you about.

Maybe you're not sure what it is that God still has for you to accomplish in your life.

Maybe you already know what it is God has called you to do, but you don't know how to go about it.

Or maybe you understand you call and you're working towards it

but a challenge has arisen and you're not sure how to deal with it.

Whatever it is that you would like God's fire to shed light on, right it down on the yellow paper.

The third thing that God's fire can do is to provide warmth.

Sometimes the problem is not in our heads but in our hearts.

Maybe we've prayed to God for something

and we believe in our heads that God is faithful and will answer,

and yet on a feeling level we are filled with anxiety and doubt and fear.

Our heads tell us that we should trust, but we feel scared

and we just want to feel God's hand around ours, or God's arms around us,

and hear God remind us that the answer will come

and that God is even now at work getting that answer, that promise, that gift ready for us

and that it will come at the time God knows is best.

So whatever it is in your life that is making you feel alone or outside in the cold

that you need the warmth of God's fire to make you feel safe and loved,

write it down on the violet paper.

And finally the fourth thing that God's fire can do

is to set your heart and spirit ablaze with so much love for God

that your tongue will start proclaiming the good news of Jesus

before you know what you're saying.

If you only love God with your head, and not your heart, then write that down on the red paper.

Or if you've only ever heard about God, but never actually gotten to know God personally,
then write that down.

Or if your prayers have been mostly one way communications with you talking to God
and you haven't really received an answer, then write that down.

**Or if you've never had an experience of God that is so amazing that you can't not speak about it,
then write that down on the red paper.**

We were baptized with water.

If you were baptized in the Lutheran church before the Lutheran Book of Worship,
and then confirmed, then a prayer was spoken over you in confirmation,
invoking the gifts of the Spirit, praying for that baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire.

If you were baptized in the Lutheran church after the Lutheran Book of Worship,
then that prayer was spoken over you at your baptism, and again at your confirmation.

Jesus came to baptize with the Holy Spirit, and to pour out on us the gifts of the Spirit
in order to set our hearts and spirits on fire
with love for God,
with love for every human being God brings into our lives,
and with love for God's whole creation.

It's this fire that clears out all the undergrowth that chokes us & burns off the waste in our lives.
It's this fire that tests us
and brings out the purity of the gold and silver, the spiritual wealth, in our souls,
It's this fire that enlightens our minds, lighting our way in the darkness of doubt and confusion.
It's this fire that warms our hearts with love of God and love for all God has made.
It's this fire that blazes in our spirits and empowers us to fight against injustice and hate.

"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

Yes, there is judgment in this fire, but there is also forgiveness.
There is wrath in this fire, but there is also mercy.
There is destruction in this fire, but also new life.

When Jesus died on the cross, it seemed as though the destruction was total –
everything gone, everything left bare, everything dead.
But then came resurrection and new life and new growth.

Earlier in this century the theologian, Teilhard de Chardin, wrote:

"Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity,
we shall harness the energies of love.

Then for the second time in the history of the world man will have discovered fire."

The energy of love is in the end what the energy of the Spirit is all about –
an energy that is like fire, bringing light, and warmth, and power.

As sure as your sinful self was drowned in the waters of baptism,
Jesus has raised you to new life, and offers to pour into your life the Holy Spirit and fire.
May you not only remember your baptism daily,
but may God pour the fire of the Spirit into your lives, destroying all that leads to death,
enabling your bodies, enlightening your minds,
encircling your hearts, and empowering your spirits
to set the world on fire with love. **Amen**