

“Fire”

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Luke 3:15-20

Have you ever wondered what life would be like if we humans had never discovered fire? I don't know if it's something many of us give much thought to these days. Fire has become one of those things that perhaps we just take for granted. Fire is as readily available to us as a flick of a Bic or the strike of a match. And fire isn't as visible in our lives as it once was. Every now and then we read about fires in the news, and we are reminded of its destructive possibilities, but most of us are far removed from the days of having open fires in our homes used as the primary source of heat for cooking and warmth. We never see the fires in our furnaces or the ones that power our car engines. Yet the presence of fire has transformed this world, it has transformed human existence. Just imagine how different the world would be without it.

Fire, because of its significance, has been held as sacred in many traditions and civilizations throughout history. While in our modern culture we often confer special status, and rightfully so, on firefighters and those brave men and women whose job it is to keep us safe from fire and put out the fires, there have been, over the ages, ones whose duty it has been to culture and sustain and nurture and keep the fire going. When humans first started using fire, early humans relied on natural fires, caused by lightning strikes or other natural occurrences, to provide a flame to start their own fires. But eventually, because of the value of fire and how it could transform the ways in which human lived, early humans made it a priority to find a way to keep the fire going.

10 000 years ago or so humans developed fire pots, in which slow-burning fires could be kept alight indefinitely by using small quantities of fuel. Nomadic people could carry these small fires with them, using them to start the fires for their evening camps. Some were given the weighty responsibility of being the keepers of the fire. They were known as the keepers of the fire. It was a weighty responsibility because heaven forbid the fire ever went out, it wasn't

easy to start another one. Given the importance of fire for heat, and steam and cooking and toolmaking, the keepers of the fire were vital the survival of the community.

This language of “keeping the fire is something that has been extended into other aspects of peoples and cultures. “Fire keeping” has come to have spiritual and religious connotations. Amongst the indigenous peoples of North America, keepers of the fire are ones who through storytelling, art, crafts, music, have kept their heritage alive and have been successful in preserving their traditional stories by inspiring others. Keeping the fire is akin to keeping alive the spirit and substance of their identity as a people. They pass on what has been passed on from past generation to past generation, the things that have enabled their people to survive and live. Ancient Rome, had similar “fire-keepers” in the ones known as the Vestal Virgins. The keeping of the Vestal Virgins was regarded as fundamental to the security and continuance of Rome. Besides living lives devoted to study and being the keepers of wisdom, these women cultivated a sacred fire that was not allowed to go out. The fire tended by the Vestal Virgins was considered to be the life of Rome itself. That’s quite something when you consider just how large and how advanced Rome was as a civilization. Fire was deeply symbolic.

The Bible, has similar traditions when it comes to “keeping the fire.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, the priests in the Temple were considered to be the “keepers of the fire.” In Leviticus, Chapter 6, it is written that, “the fire on the altar shall be kept burning. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning; and he shall lay out the burnt offering on it, and offer up in smoke the fat portions of the peace offerings on it. “ The altar in the temple was central to the life of God’s people, The presence of the fire on the altar was a reminder of the pillar of fire, the Spirit of God, that had led the Hebrew out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness. The same Spirit that Moses encountered in the burning bush.

The altar, being the place where the Hebrew people came to make their peace offerings and sacrifices, was the place where they were not only reconciled with God, but with their neighbors. The constant presence of the fire represented the presence of the living God. There was a sacred energy associated with that fire. It was the place where relationships were

restored, where God's people were inspired to move on in their lives and their relationship with God and one another -to make peace.

Our text this morning from the Gospel of Luke that Jane read for us, is also another place where we hear mention of fire, this time it is associated with the coming of Jesus Christ. Fire is what John the Baptist says that the Messiah will be bringing into the world. This is quite an announcement by John the Baptist. After all, if you go back and read some of the descriptions of John in the gospels, we might come to think that he is the fiery, hot-headed preacher. But no, says John, "There is one coming who is more powerful, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire." That one being Jesus. The one who would come bringing fire, the keeper of the fire that comes with the Holy Spirit. This was the one who would seek to share the fire of his Spirit with others.

We see this sharing in the Book of Acts, which by the way has the same author as the book of Luke. You may recall the story in Acts Chapter 2 when at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit landed on the disciples as tongues of fire. The tongues of fire were symbolic of the same fire accompanied Spirit that John the Baptist announced before Jesus was even baptized. Those first disciples who received the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost, were the ones who had become so impassioned and inspired by the heat of the Spirit that they moved out of hiding and into the dynamic first years of the Church. Those first disciples were ones who became for others the keepers of the fire that sustained the life of the early church.

Even in the years after the time of Pentecost, this relationship between fire and the Spirit of Jesus was significant in the lives of Christians. In the early centuries following the birth of the church, there were a number of Christians who lived either in solitude or in small cloistered communities in the desert. Either in and around Syria, Palestine, Egypt and other parts of the Middle East. They were known as the desert Christians. The desert Fathers and Mothers of the faith -ones who lived and communicated to others the traditions and the truths of the Christian faith. These were the ones who continued to keep the fire.

Among the sayings and stories that have come from the traditions of these desert dwellers is the story of a couple of fellows named Abba Lot and Abba Joseph. (Abba being the Aramiac word for Father). In the story, Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: Father,

according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do?

The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and it is said his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not become fire?

It may sound like a strange mystical event, and on one level it is. But on another level the message to Abba Lot from Abba Joseph was simple and straightforward. He was saying, besides caring for yourself Lot, why not discover the experience of what it means to have in your life that same passion and power, the same fire that Jesus had in his?

Lot, you might say, was living with restraint -maybe even some self-imposed limitations. He kept his little rule, his little fast, said his prayers and worked on cleansing his thoughts. How about unleashing some passion? Or perhaps let some passion unleash him? Because you see, I think this is how the spiritual life is for most of us. Like Abba Lot, in the spiritual life we keep our practices, spend time in prayer, seek God in all things, and yet at some point even all this is not enough and we are asked to become fire -be Spirit filled.

Or maybe we forsake the spiritual side of life altogether, we just look to live a relatively self-contained life, maybe try to do more good than bad, keep to ourselves, mind our own business, do our own thing. We become more like firefighters rather than fire keepers. Yet there are times when we can find ourselves wondering if this is all there is? Maybe there could be more in store, more life to live and give. Maybe we're feeling as if we haven't reached our full potential. Perhaps we could use a little heat and a little fire in our lives. This can be true of people of any age or place in life. And sometimes, it is true, that we can find ourselves looking for a little heat or some fire, some energy to get us going and keep us moving but we find ourselves to be less than inspired. This can happen even to the best of us. My thoughts turn to people I have spoken with over the years and even from my own experience of dealing with mild cases depression. There can be times and periods in life where we struggle. I have had people tell me stories about how one day they just woke up and felt as if they had no motivation and no purpose -the fire had gone out. And then, just as mysteriously as it appeared, all of a sudden, the day arrived when they felt as if they were filled with a new

energy and sense of purpose. Yet it is something that cannot be forced -it is something that happens.

John Wesley had this sort of experience in his own life. Some of you may know John Wesley as the founder of Methodism, one of the three founding denominations of the United Church of Canada. John Wesley, an ordained minister had reached a point in his life when he was almost in despair. It got so bad for Wesley that he did not have the faith to continue to preach. He was fearful, depressed and found little comfort in his religion. Eventually, Wesley went to his friend Peter Bohler and he confessed his growing misery and decision to give up the ministry. Bohler counseled Wesley otherwise -this is important, especially when we consider what it means to be keepers of the fire for others. Bohler said to his friend John Wesley, "Preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith."

Wesley persevered, but still suffered and even lacked the energy to pray. Then, on May 24th, 1738 he opened his Bible at about five in the morning and came across the words from 2 Peter that read, "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that we should become partakers of the divine nature." That evening Wesley reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate in London. About 8:45 p.m. while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, Wesley said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ." It was the point in his life when Wesley experienced for himself the heat of the Spirit within him. He came to comprehend what he had read earlier that day, the divine nature -the fire of the Spirit within him and a new passion for his faith. It was a passion for the world in which he found himself and a passion for the ones with whom he shared it. The Methodism he founded in the years that followed, emphasized things like "social holiness", missionary zeal, charity and service to the poor and vulnerable. Over the years, the Methodism of John Wesley has transformed the lives of individuals and peoples around the world.

Now Wesley may be a more outstanding case, but his story has a lesson for us all. There are times in life when that fire in our lives is absent, and there are times when we know it. Times we have not even the energy to pray and we need others to pray for us. Yet as his friend Peter Bohler encouraged, even when the fire is lacking, we still persevere, because the fire of

the Spirit, the fire of Christ is one that never goes out. The eternal God is keeping that Spirit for us and we never know when that Spirit may fill our lives. Our job is to be open -to be ready.

When that Spirit comes, it can transform us, allow a deeper passion for life and beauty ignite us in the world. It can unleash hopes, dreams and new realities. It could be through a number of ways, art, song, cooking, gardening, our work, relationships, in our simple presence to others...it could be through preaching and service...who knows? I realize that some will experience and express this passion in different ways. There are ones who will live with their heart on their sleeves, as ones who are outspoken and just plain "out there" with their passion. While others might express that passion in a less visible, less vocal, but equally powerful way. Regardless of how you come to experience the Spirit, I love what the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin wrote, when he said, "Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves and gravity, we shall harness for God energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world we will have discovered fire." Let it be the fire of that eternal Spirit.

Over the years, many a Christian writer has often referred to God as the living flame within each of us: the heat within our souls...the passion in our lives. In the Old Testament, the word that is used to describe God's power is a Hebrew word that means the "reddening of the nose." It is an image that describes I believe the eternal God who is impassioned by nature. God is the ultimate "keeper of the fire." It's that same passion we encounter in the life of the one who came to baptize the world with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus is the human who embodies this passion for eternity. In fact, did you know that the word passion is one that originates directly from the life of Christ? It's not a word that we just apply to his life...traditionally, to speak of passion was to speak of Christ. The word passion was used by Christian theologians to refer to the sufferings of Christ on the cross. Later the use of the word was extended to include the sufferings of the martyrs. But not just a suffering for suffering's sake. This is what we might refer to as a suffering love. A love that is brought about by sacrifice for the sake of others. It is what we do as we keep the fire for others, pray for others, move beyond ourselves and seek to sustain life. It means harnessing for God the energies of love into our lives and into the world so, as Chardin put it so well, "we humans may discover fire for the second time."