

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Burning but Not Consumed"

Luke 3:15-22; Isaiah 43:1-7

Here we are. Isn't that amazing. We have all gotten out of bed, put on our clothes, and one way or another gotten ourselves down to our little spot here in Gilman's Corner. Maybe we came because we didn't have anything better to do. Maybe we came because we've always come. Maybe we came because it's the one time a week we can count on a hug. Not bad reasons any one.

But maybe there's also a deeper reason. Maybe we're here not just because it's easy or habit or friendly. We're here because we are seeking God. We're here because our hearts are restless in this world and we feel a pull to know the God who created us.

For some of us if we hadn't just read our passage from Luke this morning, we might be embarrassed to admit that pull toward God. We don't live in a world where it's easy to say to our friends, "You know, I really want to know God." Our spiritual thoughts seem foolish. We can talk about our children and the weather and our vacation plans all day long, but bringing up how goes it with our souls, how in the world do we talk about that?

As one author says, when faced with the divine we do one of three things (a) call 911, (b) eat a hotdog, or (c) recognize God. How many of us as we go about our day-to-day existence just eat the hotdog?

And yet. We still long for God. We long to know God, to be connected with the Creator of heaven and earth. We long to have the skies of our souls split open and have the Holy Spirit descend.

In Luke chapter 3, that yearning is met. Luke tells us that all of the people had been baptized.

All of the normal people—the hotdog eating people—have done something extraordinary. They have responded to John's preaching and realigned themselves with God's way in the world. Jesus, most human of all humans, follows suit, going beneath the murky waters. And God does something incredible. Jesus standing with water dripping off of him, with all of the fellow baptized around, prays. And in that moment the skies break open, the Holy Spirit descends and for a moment the yearning of Creation is fulfilled and human and divine meet.

It's the experience that many of us long for. We long for our perishable human nature to be united with the imperishable nature of God.

But you know what has struck me the most this past week about Jesus' baptism? It's what happens right before the skies split open. Jesus prays.

The prayer comes right before the skies split. That's not to say that mystical experiences of God's direct presence come ever time we pray, but prayer is often a place where we encounter the divine.

Jesus praying isn't an anomaly. I think Luke must have really wanted us to understand the importance of prayer in Jesus life because there are seven accounts of Jesus praying that are only found in Luke's Gospel. Seven different times that Jesus stops to take time to communicate and be with God that aren't found in any other Gospel.

Prayer is the very first thing Jesus does after baptism as he starts his public ministry. Before he does any miracles, before he teaches, before

he walks on water, he turns his face toward God and depends upon the Holy Spirit.

If this is what our Lord does, I wonder, “Do we depend up on the Holy Spirit and our connection to God in prayer for the spiritual stamina to go into the world and make a difference in people’s lives through Christ”¹? Prayer is our lifeline on a personal and a communal level. Without prayer, we can jump ahead of ourselves and tire out quickly. Our wheels can start spinning, and they just as easily spin off the road as in the right direction. Prayer gives us direction for when we’re clueless and energy when we’re tired.

But you know, prayer doesn’t always come naturally. How many times do we avoid praying rather than turning to prayer. It’s like a shirking away in the shadows trying to avoid God.

I’ve come to realize over the years that that shirking away is one of the surest signs that are seeing prayer as work. It is another thing on our Christian checklist: Read my Bible. Go to church. Pray. It can feel like one more task in the Christian life. We fall into thinking that God is a taskmaster who is going to burn us up with anger or disappointment or something if we’re not meeting goals or But as spiritual director and Episcopal priest, Martin Smith, points out if this is what we think “how are we to know when we have done enough to satisfy God?”

That is a good question. How do we know when we’ve prayed enough? The answer is simple: we can’t. We can never know that we’ve prayed enough. And if we take 1 Thessalonians seriously, we’re supposed to pray without ceasing. If it’s a task, it’s a limitless task.

But, you know what. Work isn’t the only way to see prayer. It’s not even the correct way. What if we saw prayer as God’s gift to us? The place

where God can heal and transform us. Where the Lord wants to lavish his love upon us. Ellen Davis, a professor of Old Testament at Duke, tells the story of finding spiritual direction with a cloistered nun named Sister Mary Kathleen. She says,

“When I began meeting with her, I did not know what to ask for; I knew only what I lacked: peace of heart. She quickly recognized that I did not know anything about prayer, and so she took it upon herself to teach me how to set aside a quiet space in my life for God to enter and speak. It was slow daily work; there were no dramatic moments when the heavens suddenly opened. Yet one day, at the end of about nine months, I realized that I was no longer confused and restless. Undramatically, and yet with a certainty that had previously eluded me, I knew what I was meant to do with my life, namely, to preach and teach for the church.”

This is prayer’s invitation to us: to come in and find rest for our souls. To encounter a God we spend much of our time avoiding.

You see, we avoid God because God burns with an unrelenting passion. It’s no mistake that John the Baptist says that the one who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. When the Spirit comes at Pentecost, the Spirit comes *as* fire resting on each of the disciples. God is a fire whose burning sets us alive, but whose burning exposes all of the dark corners of our souls. But God, God burns without consuming. The exposing of our souls in prayer does not lead to our death like we fear, but amazingly, beyond our wildest hopes, leads to new life. We pass through the waters of baptism and are not overwhelmed. We walk through fire of prayer and the flame does not consume us. Like the burning bush, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the flames of the divine burn us and yet we are not consumed.

¹ Robert M. Brearley, “Pastoral Perspective” 238.

The French have a word called “disponibilité.”² [dee-pon-ee-beel-ee-tay]. The crudest translation in English would be disposability. A better translation is availability, readiness, being at one’s service. It’s the idea of putting yourself at another’s disposal. That was Jesus’ position before God at his baptism. He was making himself utterly available to God. One of the classic reasons Baptists baptize by going completely under the water is that if God didn’t go halfway with us, we don’t go halfway with God. All of us is made available to God, all of our selves die beneath the waters and all of our selves are raised again to walk in newness of life.

But staying in that baptismal state of disponibilité, of availability is hard work. It is hard over and over again to open yourself to God. To pull open your soul and hold it there for the burning of God’s presence. To submerge yourself completely.

The work of prayer is the work disponibilité. Of putting ourselves at another’s disposal—God’s disposal.

I read an article this week written by a Jewish woman thinking about faith after interviewing a Christian pastor for her job as a journalist. She’s a pretty devout Jew, but she was saying that her most spiritual experience happened when she was in the eighth grade. She was out with her friends having fun. As they were sitting around, goofing off, waiting for their parents to come pick them up, a woman in her twenties came up to them. She said, “I see you girls are having fun and that makes me so happy. But there might come a time in your life when you’re not having fun, when you’re feeling sad, and I wanted you girls to know that if that ever happens God cares about you and you can reach out to him and he’ll be there.” The young woman walked away and this journalist said she and her friends—like

² I’m indebted to Rick Steele for this insight.

most preteens would—laughed at what a loser this young woman was. Yet, the journalist reflected, “I didn’t realize it at the time, but in that parking lot, I was having the most religious experience I would ever have in my life. I think about that woman all the time.”³

I wonder if the young woman who approached those girls was experiencing a moment of disponibilité. I highly doubt it was her natural inclination to go talk to a group of unknown girls about God. I wonder if she, right before walking over had had that moment in prayer of sensing the Holy Spirit’s leading and being at that God’s service.

Availability to God is the foundation of true spirituality. Openness to God in prayer forms a spirituality that is a fountain of life that doesn’t run dry. That moves us toward one another and God without duty or dryness. It’s the divine fire that sets us on fire, but does not consume us.

In prayer, we continue what our baptism started. We continue the work of putting our whole selves at God’s disposal. We, normal people who faced with a burning bush would just as likely eat a hotdog as take off our shoes in worship, have chosen to do something remarkable in our baptisms. We stepped into the waters and took our first steps into a life of prayer and communion with our Creator. We chose to completely align ourselves with God, to hold nothing back, to do the hard work of being at God’s service.

We give what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose. That is beneath all of the reasons for our coming to this place this morning. We come because we long for the imperishable fire of God that will purify us. We come because we have made and are making ourselves available to the God. We come, distracted and lonely,

³ Taffy Brodesser-Akner “What Would Cool Jesus Do?” December 17, 2015 in GQ.

complacent and confused, to be made alive by
the God who sets us on fire to burn with divine
holy love. Amen.