

O God, You are the source of our joy! Teach us to rejoice in You always, that our joy may ignite the love of You in all the world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever seen fire and water in the same place? Maybe you've attended a festive gathering where the host had flickering candles—you know, those little tea lights—floating in bowls of water. Have you seen that? Firelight dancing across ripples of water: the effect is charming! On the more dramatic side, there's a famous spring in Taiwan called the Fire and Water Spring, on the southwest face of Zhentou Mountain. Natural gas continually flows out from the same fissure where spring water bubbles out. Long ago, the gas was ignited; apparently a monk discovered the cliff face ablaze in 1701. Story is, the fire has never gone out. For over three centuries, fire and water have come out of the same opening in that mountain. Sheets of unquenchable fire flicker across the rock face even as water streams out, splashing into a pool below. Fire and water together.

Today, deep in the drama of Advent, fire and water are all through our Gospel story. Advent as a season of expectation is beautifully restorative. As we prepare for the birth of Christ and celebrate our own rebirth through the waters of baptism, Advent joy can be like a fountain bubbling up from the deep well of Christian tradition. The hymns are gorgeous, and Advent themes of hope and healing are like water for thirsty souls. But Advent is also apocalyptic! The blazing power of God is

continually erupting into this world, setting hearts alight and fanning the embers of hope into flame. Advent makes clear the radical nature of Christ's Incarnation as a time of startling transformation!

Two Sundays ago, we heard the Evangelist Luke speak of global tumult and other apocalyptic signs of the approaching redemption of God. ^{21:25-28} Last Sunday, we met John the Baptist in the wilderness "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." ^{3:3} In the story this morning, we find ourselves among thousands who have streamed out to John to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Some might have come for the spectacle of it, to be entertained by this prophetic figure who is just on fire with holy indignation! But surely most of them—most of us—are drawn to the possibility of renewal, yearning to reform our lives, eager to see what it's like to do justice, cherish fidelity, and walk humbly with God. ^{Mic 6:8} We're looking for our Redeemer, and we want to feel different ... to feel hopeful.

Well, John doesn't make it easy. The drama of his performance is alarming! His words blaze like the unquenchable flames of the burning bush before which Moses bowed in days of old. John knows something many seem to have forgotten: we worship an incendiary God! As we move closer, we can see John standing in the Jordan river as he delivers a searing critique. "You brood of vipers!! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?!" John is raging at the cruel and unrighteous behavior of those who do not give a fig about their neighbor. Calling his listeners vipers: a brutal insult! Everyone's paying attention now. Vipers are venomous

snakes whose bite is excruciatingly painful and can be fatal—the venom causing damage not only to soft tissue but to internal organs, sometimes with hemorrhaging and respiratory failure. Centuries earlier, the prophet Micah had used the image of snakes striking with their fangs to characterize “unjust trading practices, corrupt judicial rulings, and the exploitation of farmers” by politically powerful elites.¹ Now John thunders his own blistering prophetic word: this is no time for complacency about the venomous, predatory harms that do such damage to communal life! It’s no time for unwitting complicity in social structures and ideologies that are heartless toward those in need!

There in the Jordan river, John rages at injustice, fists pounding the surface of the water, his diatribe scorching all who hear him. “Even now,” he shouts, “even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees! Every tree that does not bear good fruit [will be] cut down and thrown into the fire!” So there’s FIRE now, right there in the Jordan river! John’s face is aglow with the urgency of his message. Later, some will say they saw flames around John’s head.²

Folks in the crowd are well and truly frightened. A few of the bolder ones press forward to get some clarification. “‘Fruit worthy of repentance’? What does that mean? What should we do?” Some tax collectors push to the front, ignoring the hostile glares of those near them. “Teacher, what should we do?” Even soldiers, seasoned warriors, look unsettled—“And we, what should we do?” John sees their fear. Something sweeps over him, something that looks for all the world like

pastoral gentleness.³ His voice softens, and he answers with a warm smile, “Share what you have with those in need. And do not extort or threaten anyone.” Oh! Simple things—things the Torah has taught us all our lives. Share what we have, and don’t extort or threaten anyone. Those around us grow calmer, relief visible on their faces. John is one fierce individual, that’s for sure. But it looks like he loves us and just wants us to love our neighbor! Some wonder whether John might be the Messiah, the one who will “bring good news to the poor” and “release to the captives,” who will let all “the oppressed go free.” Luke 4:18 (Isa 58:6; 61:1–2) Our hearts thrill at the prospect.

John can see what we’re wondering. Joy lights up his face, and he answers the question on everyone’s minds: “One who is more powerful than I is coming! I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire!” The word “fire” seems to ignite an intensity in him, and once again he launches into his ferocious diatribe⁴: the Messiah has a “winnowing fork in his hand,” and he will “clear his threshing floor,” burning the chaff with “unquenchable fire!”

Friends, the fire of divine judgment is real. Isaiah says it. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all say it. The book of Revelation says it over and over again! We cannot love the prophetic firebrand John the Baptist, venerating him as a holy witness and blessed martyr, without understand this: our God is an incendiary God of righteousness, truth, and justice!

But for believers, this fire is a cause of joy, not shame or fear.

Because it blazes forth from the infinite spring of God's grace!

Flames of holy fire and a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, ^{John 4:14}

coming from the same place!

Fire and water together.

Advent is extraordinarily important,

because more than any other season of the Church year,

it shows us a paradox at the core of Christian life:

the fire of divine judgment and the water of divine grace

stream from the same place, which is the very heart of God,

through Jesus Christ!

God's incendiary indignation at sin flames forth from the same fissure

out of which pours the water of grace for all who repent.

That fissure—a crack in the cruelty and violence of the world—

has been opened, once and for all, by Jesus's Incarnation.

Friends, listen to John the Baptist and rejoice!

Those who've been oppressed or traumatized hear the good news that vipers are

seen and recognized for what they do!

Those who strike with their fangs, tearing at the vulnerable,

poisoning the hearts and minds of entire communities,

will be held accountable in the unquenchable fire of God's indignation!

And all of us sinners hear the good news that it's not too late!

There's still a chance to reform and renew our lives,
a chance to bear fruits worthy of repentance
before Christ sweeps the chaff of this world into unquenchable fire!

None of us is perfect. Not one of us can stand before the throne of Christ,
the glorious Savior and Judge of all creation!

But we can rejoice, because what we need to do is so simple:

repent,
share what we have, and
refrain from exploiting or threatening others in this world God so loves.

Then we can embrace Advent joy,
a joy blazing like fire from the fountain of grace we have in Jesus Christ!

And so, with all thanks to God for the brilliant witness of John the Baptist,

we rejoice in the One who was, and is, and is to come ^{Rev 1:8}:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

15 December 2024

Advent 3C, Gaudete Sunday

Zephaniah 3:14–20; Philippians 4:4–7; Luke 3:7–18

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ See Carolyn J. Sharp, *Micah*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2025), 238–239.

² This is my imaginative foreshadowing of the Pentecost scene in Acts 2:3–4 (the Acts of the Apostles having been written by Luke as well), where the anointing of the Holy Spirit is represented as flames. On that Acts 2 scene as fulfilment of this prophecy by John the Baptist, see John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 94. Another relevant intertext may be Mic 3:8, where Micah of Moresheth thunders, “But as for me, I am filled with the power of the spirit of YHWH, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (my translation).

³ These verses are an interpolation found only in Luke. In every instance, such special Lukan material should be taken to signal something important about the purposes of the Third Gospel.

⁴ The chiasmic structure in this passage is rhetorically powerful and literarily artful. The Baptist’s discourse is shaped in this way:

fiery judgment (3:7–9)

reasoned pastoral instruction (vv. 10–14)

fiery judgment (vv. 16–17).

Carroll observes, “A community of persons who have received John’s baptism will be marked by compassionate care for the needy and by justice. John may preach in the wilderness, but his message of forgiveness and repentance directs the people back to their homes and villages, restoring authentic community” (*Luke*, 93).