

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 15, 2024

Year C, 3 Advent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#)

[Canticle 9](#)

[Philippians 4:4-7](#)

[Luke 3:7-18](#)

+ + +

They say the first Advent wreaths were actual wagon wheels. In snowy northern Europe, once the first real snow of winter set in, you wouldn't be using your wagon for a while. The harvest was over, work on the fields was done, the daylight hours grew short and the pace of life grew slower. So people would take a wheel off their wagons and bring it inside and use it as a candle stand, using the power of fire to stand in for the absent sun.

And still today we do the same thing, three bright flames on our wreath on this third Sunday of Advent. We live in a world of electric light instantly available, but there's something about a real flame that's still captivating. We could replace the candles on our Advent wreath with electric light bulbs, but it wouldn't be the same. Neither would electric lights on either side of the altar, or a bank of electric light bulbs instead of our bank of votive candles. Flicking a switch for a kind of insta-prayer doesn't hold the same ritual power as holding the lit taper to the wick and watching the flame begin to glow and dance.

There's something living about a fire. We gaze into a campfire or a fireplace in a way we never would with an electric lamp. Fire can be a powerful friend, giving not only light but also warmth we need to stay alive. And yet of course fire can also be a powerful and dangerous enemy. People here in Santa Rosa know that only too well. The traumas of lost homes and lost neighbors are never far from the surface here in our community. The same fire that can be comforting and captivating when it's under control can also be destructive and devastating when it runs wild.

There are three fires in the gospel reading we heard today about John the Baptist; reminiscent of our three flames on our Advent wreath. Three mentions of fire, and that same tension between life and destruction is here. Any tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. The one who is coming after John will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He will gather in the wheat, but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Two images of destruction, of worthless crops being burned away to nothingness. One image of life, as the coming Messiah energizes his followers with the fire of the Holy Spirit, the fire the disciples will receive at Pentecost.

Today's gospel reminds us that the One who is coming to us is not coming in the tame, obedient light of an electric bulb. The God we await is the God who once appeared to the Israelites in the desert as a pillar of fire, and who once appeared to Moses in a blazing bush—a bush, the story tells us, that though it was blazing, yet it was not consumed. A feature it has in common with those flames of Pentecost, which descended on Jesus' friends yet without harming them.

In those images I find the courage to hope that the fire of God, wild and fierce though it is, is not ultimately a fire of destruction, at least not the destruction of anything that is good. God is not the wildfire that steals on us to destroy life. God is the refiner's fire that melts away the impurities and burns away what is false so what is true can shine in glory.

In a society preoccupied with deciding who is in and who is out, it is easy to hear John the Baptizer's words about the One who is coming gathering in the wheat and burning the chaff with fire as about two different groups of people: the good ones are the wheat to be gathered in, the bad ones are the chaff to be burned. Indeed, this passage can be a kind of text of terror if we use it to justify our smug belief that those who are unlike us are chaff to be burned—or in the opposite direction, if we hear this passage as confirmation that we are the chaff and a fearsome, punishing God is ready to doom us to eternal destruction. Yet as I hear the words of John challenging those around him to change the way they live, I suspect what is going on here is more complicated, more challenging, and also more redeeming.

As I contemplate my own closet with far more than two coats hanging in it and my own unwillingness to give my possessions to my neighbor; as I notice my own tendency to “collect more than the amount prescribed” for me, whether of money, convenience, or praise; as I consider my own dissatisfaction with the blessings so richly bestowed on me—I become keenly aware that the line between wheat and chaff runs not between me and someone else—but right through my very self.

I need the burning, glowing fire of God to sweep through me, to burn away what is worthless and kindle into action what is of God.

Perhaps you too feel yourself in need of such a Savior.

And you and I have been called together to stand in the fire of the love of God, a fire that is gentle enough to comfort us and fierce enough to purify us, to let ourselves be refined into who God has made us to be.