

Text: Malachi 3: 1-4
Title: Christmas Fire
Date: 12.06.09
Roger Allen Nelson

There is a rollicking-mournful-hopeful spiritual or slave song entitled, “O Mary Don’t You Weep.” The lyrics refer to the story of Mary and Martha and the raising of Lazarus, but the song is full of imagery from the exodus, and the crossing of the Red Sea, and the promises that God makes Noah. The song predates the Civil War, but it has been recorded and re-interrupted by everybody from The Swan Silvertones, to Aretha Franklin, Burl Ives, Bones Thugs ‘n Harmony, Take Six, Bruce Springsteen,.....and some really dreadful choral renditions.

The central lyric is:

*O Mary don’t you weep, don’t you moan
O Mary don’t you weep, don’t you moan
Pharaoh’s army got drown-ded, O Mary don’t you weep*

With its images of liberation “O Mary Don’t You Weep” became an important song during the civil rights movement of the sixties. But, tucked away in one of the verses there is a phrase that I can’t shake:

*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no water but fire next time
Pharaoh’s army got drown-ded, O Mary don’t you weep*

You may recognize in there the title of James Baldwin’s important little book about race relations in America: “The Fire Next Time.”

No water, but fire next time....

It is a holy and haunting line.
It sparks fear.
It kindles hope.
It imagines a scorchin’ ragin’ blaze.
It taps into the longing that somehow-someway-someday things will be made right ~
all that is tarnished will be fired clean,
and all that is polluted will be burned pure.

No water, but fire next time...

It is not a gentle image. It is hard and harsh. It stokes a righteous anger that justice will be done and the pompous and the greedy will get their due, and those who abuse and defile will be punished, and all that is corrupt, squalid, smutty, lewd, vile, and wicked will be burned off.

The prophet Malachi puts it this way:

*“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” say the Lord Almighty.
“Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of*

righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like a well fed calves. You will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act” says the Lord Almighty.

Makes you shudder. Even if you’re dancing like a well fed calf ~ it makes you shudder.....

But, has some injustice or some pain burned in you so bad that you wanted fire to make things right? Have you ever wanted crooks and criminals, terrorists and tyrants to get what they have comin’? Have you ever been wronged and wanted a fire next time? Maybe we’re too prim and pretty for such base desires?

The gospel lesson for Advent One read:

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

But, this morning, Advent Two, reads:

*Who can endure the day of his coming?
Who can stand when he appears?
For he will be like a refiner’s fire....*

I want to think with you this morning about the coming of the Lord.

I want to think with you about the in-breaking of God.

If God’s purpose is restoring creation to the *shalom* that he intended...

If one gift of Christmas is God putting things to rights...

Then what are we to make of the images of judgment?

What are we to make of the fire?

Should we stand up and raise our heads?

Or, should we duck and cover?

No water, but fire next time...

Some context for this text:

The Israelites had been overrun by the Babylonians and carted off in captivity, but now they were home again. They had returned from exile and had begun to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, but now all they knew was an uneventful waiting period.

There were no signs of God’s glory. They were poor and insignificant; the neighboring heathen were faring better than they. The coming Kingdom seemed a quaint distant notion; they were a shadow of their former selves. What they anticipated had not lived up to its billing. They were weary, cynical, ambivalent, adrift, jaded, flat. Their worship lacked purpose and was slack of spirit. They could barely hear the echo of God’s voice....

So, into that reality Malachi (which means “my messenger”) speaks a word that the Lord is coming ~ but he is coming with fire and soap. Malachi is a reminder that righteousness can’t come without judgment and that the world can’t be put to rights without the wrongs being wrung out.

And, on one level that is encouraging.

In my early twenties I spent most summers working at a youth camp/horse ranch and I bailed a lot of hay. I loved bailing hay.

I loved standing on the hay wagon and throwing heavy bails.

I loved the smell of the open field and the slant of the setting sun.

I loved the beauty of a well stacked wagon.

I love the sense of having accomplished something.

I loved riding that last wagon home ~ sun burned, sweaty, stanky, and sore....

But, there would be a hot shower and a bar of soap waiting. And, the hay dust that was in every orifice, and the manly mix of dirt and stink that was caked all over me, and the dry thatch of my hair ~ it would all be scrubbed clean and blown out. There no getting clean without soap and hot water. There was no getting clean without a good scrubbing.

Dear friends, part of God's coming is the work of purifying and refining. He comes not to destroy but to restore, but that means scrubbing out what is stained and soiled. As an expression of love he would tenderly and crudely make us into the people that he intends us to be. And, sometimes that process is painful ~ like lye soap or the "power of pumice".....

Kathleen Norris in writing about judgment in scripture offers this:

I began to see God's fire, like a good parent's righteous anger, as something that can flare up, challenge, and even change us, but that does not destroy the essence of who we are. The thought of all my weeds burning off so that only the wheat remains came to seem a good thing.

And so, God comes to make a way....

through repentance and baptism,

through the life long process of sanctification,

through confession and assurance and the constant call to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly,

through the work of the Spirit,

through this life with one another,

God is scrubbing the stink out and scrubbing the *shalom* in....

Thanks be to God.

But, if we leave it there....

If we leave the coming of God in Christ as the gift that washes us clean of bad habits and the soiling of sin.... If we leave it to all that is personal ~ then either we have missed the nature of evil in this world or we've missed the nature of God.

For any theology, any biblical vision, any sense of God's work in this world that doesn't account for the starkest horrors of human history does a disservice to the mystery of Christmas, is an impotent hoax, and limits the gospel to self improvement and personal hygiene. Whatever our faith is it has to be able to stand in the coldest dark of this brutal world.....

What if we come at this way?

Scripture constructs an image of God. Through the revelation of history, story, law, poetry, and prophetic voice scripture pieces together a picture of God. One of the defining qualities of that picture is the language of judgment. God can't abide with injustice, brokenness, or the selling short of his intention for human life. God can't pass over the marring and scaring of *shalom* with just a nudge and a wink. There is something in the heart of God that cannot tolerate the distortion, decay, disease, depravity, dementia, destruction and death of creation.

It demands judgment.

Of which the prophet paints a picture: Fire will fly, wheat will get shook from chaff, lye soap will be used for a good scrubbing, and metals will be refined by the flames.

And, we want judgment.

And, we fear judgment.

And, we can't imagine a God of judgment.

And, we can't imagine a God without judgment.

And, we don't know where else to turn....

But, judgment is part of the biblical text, it is part of the construction, and it is part of what seems to be the very nature of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world....

Dear friends, the gift of Christmas is judgment. The gift of Christmas is fire. But, the most profound mystery is that God's way of judgment is a baby born in the back of a dank and dusty stable, between the cows and the hay. God's way of judgment is on a cross, between two criminals. God's way of judgment is Jesus Christ.

Makes you shudder.

Amen?