

TO BUILD A FIRE

ROMANS 13: 11-14; LUKE 24: 36-44

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As Advent gets underway and winter descends upon Western New York I recalled recently Jack London's story, "To Build a Fire." Maybe you remember it.

London describes a man unfamiliar with the ways of the north and arrogant about his ability to conquer the outdoors making his way deep into the Yukon, alone, on a 75 degree-below-zero day. The man falls into one of the most common traps of the Arctic—a snow covered spring-fed creek—gets wet up to his knees and tries unsuccessfully to keep a fire going.

You can guess the ending—numbness, sleep, and frozen death.

I share this ominous story by way of an introduction to Advent because it resonates with Jesus' admonition today to his disciples to be spiritually vigilant and prepared.

Probably most of us think of Advent as the time of getting ready for the birth of Jesus which it is. But the other historic focus of Advent is preparation for his second coming at the end of time—the subject of the reading from Matthew.

As it turns out, Advent is all about building a fire. In pre-Christian communities, as the winter solstice approached, candles affixed to a wreath or wheel representing the sun were lighted. This ritual gave people a way to remember and celebrate the sun as the source of life even as it disappeared leaving a frozen wilderness until spring. Early Christians shrewdly adopted this practice as a way of honoring their source of life—God's son—whose birth conveniently coincided with the solstice.

But the message I want to explore today is Jesus' warning to keep a disciplined vigilance while we can, before the winds of cosmic change reorder our lives.

Matthew is clear: only God knows when the end of history comes. Speculation or worry about that which we cannot control is pointless. Rather, he says, and this is today's reading in a nutshell, make yourself ready so you are not left wondering what happened to your life and all that you value when the world changes.

Noah building the ark until the floods came and his entire generation lost; workers at the mill, one taken, one left behind; the householder who sleeps and is robbed by a thief in the night; a lone man full of himself and inexperienced in the cold wilderness, these are object lessons for us today.

What is it that lulls us into such complacency? I am reminded of St. Augustine's prayer just before his conversion, "O Lord, make me a Christian, but not quite yet." Or a doctor friend of mine whose greatest lament is some of his patients he works hard to treat, yet who continue to abuse their bodies and flirt with death. What lulls us into sleep?

St. Paul's answer to that question today is "bodily appetites, the will of the flesh."

C.S. Lewis said the dark forces would keep us sedated with pleasures and habits; none intrinsically bad until our appetite for alcohol or sex or prescription drugs or work or food or success consumes us.

And what would it take to wake us up? To change our ways? To want to follow Jesus not just someday but today?

Matthew is not using scare tactics to get us to be vigilant. He is merely describing what happens when people fall asleep. Changing old behaviors does not come easily, witness the PCUSA hemorrhaging 35,000 members a year for the past three decades, yet in many ways conducting business as usual.

Habits die hard. Years of repeated behavior are not reversed overnight. The poet John Ashbery warns, “No matter how you twist it, life stays frozen in the headlights. Funny, none of us heard the roar.” I presume Ashbery refers here to the roar of the Mack truck of climate change or urban decay or personal illness.

But Advent and the Scripture readings during this brief season are smelling salts for the soul. Just when the rest of society enters a shopping-induced stupor from early October to the gift return lines of January, Advent urges us to refocus.

In fact, Americans have refocused at historic moments on two occasions called the First and Second Great Awakenings. And the result was dramatic: so intense was the Second Great Awakening here in Western New York that church historians refer to our region as the “burned over district.”

You see, things had gotten brittle and stale in the Protestant church. The needs of the institution superseded the needs of the people. So when those first preachers suggested that faith was a vital personal experience and living relationship to God—the idea was like putting a match to dry kindling. It spread like a great conflagration.

And is this not the mission of the church? To stir the embers of faith; to strengthen us within the warm fellowship of God’s people; to live with a burning passion for justice; in other words, to be Christ-light to the world.

You can see why they called upstate New York the “burned over district.” The fire of God’s presence swept across villages and towns from Buffalo to Albany and transformed a sleepy, moribund church into new “volunteer societies.”

From worrying about legal minutia the church shifted its focus and energy and tackled the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, ending child labor, founding the American Bible Society, and establishing many colleges.

My hunch is we are living in remarkably similar times. Any age can fall into spiritual slumber: the Presbyterian Church in the 1820s; the church in Germany in the 1930s; the mainline church today.

Falling into a spiritual stupor happens when what used to be light and warmth in your life grows dim from inattention or is taken for granted; the disciples, for instance, dozing off, failing Jesus in the hour of his greatest need in Gethsemane.

When we lose touch with a relationship or dream—through overwork or misplaced priorities or some consuming addiction—when we lose touch with the life of a marriage or family or church we run the risk of losing all that is precious to us before we can do anything to change it.

So Matthew's word to us today is this: if the state of our spiritual wakefulness is determined by the condition of our souls then there's work to be done in this and every generation before God brings history to a close.

The first task of Advent is to tend the fire of faith in our hearts. When I was training for my marathon and consulted with my doctor to see if this was a wise thing to do or not she said: listen to your body, go for it, but don't be foolish.

Good advice. If we could learn to listen to the spiritual yearning in our souls we might find ourselves taking better care of ourselves spiritually—rather than trying to satisfy our God-sized hunger with the cultural junk food du jour.

The strategy of the church to transform members and change the world is simple. It doesn't have to do initially with lobbying or fund-raising or politics.

The church brings about deep change by inviting people to a simple meal. To this table where we are fed bread and wine; where our senses come alive and we see ourselves and our neighbor differently; this table where we find joy and hope and invite others to the feast of life and renewal.

Actually, it's a brilliant strategy. If you were going to change people what better way than to get them to sit down together, pass the mashed potatoes and gravy and find in their common need for sustenance, the hunger for peace on earth and a spiritual yearning only God can fill.

The New Testament could not be more demonstrative. It tells how a wealthy landowner prepared a feast and sent out servants to invite everyone in the region; how Jesus constantly got in trouble with the authorities shattering the artificial boundaries of social class eating with tax collectors and prostitutes; and on his last night with his disciples prepared them a meal as a way of reinforcing everything he taught them.

And then, of course, there was his showing up for supper in Emmaus that opened the eyes of the disciples and on that bright, cold morning in Galilee after Peter and the others had been out fishing all night. It was just turning to dawn. They rowed their boats back to shore and saw a figure on the beach fanning a flickering flame.

By the time they approached they saw it was the risen Christ standing over a fire he had prepared for their breakfast.

After the meal on the beach he asked Peter if he loved him to which Peter said yes and the risen Christ said, "Then feed my sheep"; and he repeated this question and answer three times as if to make sure that having had our own hunger satisfied we would not forget those stranded and alone in this cold world and on the verge of starvation.

If the first task of Advent is tend the fire of faith in our hearts by coming to this table the second task of Advent is to feed his lambs.

In contrast to Jack London's lone figure who couldn't start a fire, Christ lights a fire in us that illumines and heals humanity. I think we Westminster, we the Presbyterian church, we God's people realize we are standing at a moment of history that threatens to engulf the world but that at the same time we are facing new alternatives and promise. The question today is will we drift into death or reclaim God's dream for the church.

I think many of us are like Jack London's man in the Yukon—often blissfully out of touch with the suffering pulse of the planet and comfortable and happy with our little world until something extinguishes our fire.

My son who learned about building and keeping fires in the wilderness tells me fires don't tend themselves. I remember camping with him one night in the Smoky Mountain National Forest a few years ago.

We spent an hour gathering poplar bark for tinder bundles and kindling and then specific sizes of dead branches before we pre-built the fire and finally lighted it. Then he carefully kept his eye on its progress through the evening as we warmed ourselves, cooked our dinner and used its light for conversation. Whenever it died down, he would stoke the embers, add another branch, and blow into it until its blaze engulfed the new wood.

It's no different with the embers of our faith. We don't make the flame, but we keep it. At some point along the way someone carried the light of Christ into our lives and our hearts caught fire with zeal for learning more about him and inviting him into our relationships.

I suspect some of us here today have dim memories of that once warm glow; others can feel it even now as we prepare to gather at this table; or maybe some of us have never felt it at all.

Matthew calls each and every one of us to pay attention to that soul fire. If it goes out our fate will be like that man in the Yukon—numbness, sleep and death. But if we tend the flame it will guide, instruct and save us. It is the fire of the jeweler who wants to refine pure gold from rough ore. It is the fire of the potter who wants to make useful vessels out of damp clay. It melts us down and reforms us more nearly each day into the image of Christ.

Has any generation needed to wake up more than ours? Climate change, endangered species, weapons of mass destruction, a burgeoning underclass, epidemic diseases in third world countries.

Each new day is an opportunity to change ourselves and the world before it's too late. When you think about it why should we live with any less sense of urgency?

Each new day before Christ returns, said St. Paul, is not frustration but grace to tend the flame then go out and invite others into the warmth and fullness of God's life. Amen.