

St. Joseph of Arimathea

Episcopal Church

2172 Sawmill River Road

White Plains, New York 10607

The Second Sunday of Advent (A)

December 8, 2019

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

“Hot, Hot, Hot”

The Holy Gospel according to

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared
in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,
“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has

come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the

wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat

into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Dear Lord, catch us when we fall, bring us closer to you, and heal us for all eternity, in your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

In college I was a chemistry major, and we had a laboratory class in which we were using metallic potassium, a silvery very reactive element that can separate the molecules of hydrogen from oxygen from each other in water, and as you probably guessed, that happens when potassium comes in contact with water, H₂O,

potassium separates the hydrogen from the oxygen. At the end of the experiment, I had small piece of potassium left over. Metallic potassium is usually stored in a container of oil. But we did not receive any particular instruction about what to do with our left-over small lump of potassium, so into the big deep sink right beside me in the laboratory, I just poured my piece of potassium out of the test tube down the drain. Immediately it came right back up hitting the ceiling like a bullet, or a rocket ship, narrowly missing my eye. Of course, what had happened was that the potassium had reacted with the water in the basin trap

of the sink, produced a bunch of hydrogen bubbles very quickly around itself, and had a choice of whether to continue down the basin trap or escape to the surface with its hydrogen bubbles back through the drain, and it obviously chose the path of least resistance, with the rapidly forming bubbles of hydrogen propelling it back up the drain and on up to the ceiling. I never did find it. But I was a bit shaken by the incident, to say the least. No one else seemed to have 'left over' potassium for some reason or another, or at least I didn't see other shooting pieces of metallic potassium in the lab that day. And, oddly enough, no one

else seemed to notice my demonstration that day in the chemistry lab. But my little unintended experiment of putting metallic potassium in water shows what an ‘unquenchable fire is like’—if anyone had added more water to the potassium, the water itself would have been ‘burned’, separated into its two component elements, oxygen and hydrogen. Water cannot quench a potassium fire; water only would make such a fire grow hotter and hotter and hotter, and the hydrogen released would readily explode if a spark were to be put near it.

Other elements in nature react in somewhat comparable ways—for example,

pure phosphorous actually ‘burns’ under water, water cannot put out a phosphorous fire: it also is an unquenchable fire.

When John the Baptist was speaking about unquenchable fire, no one in the first century had been able to refine pure potassium or pure phosphorous, but most everyone had seen or heard of burning sulfur in a volcanic eruption, and there also water would not be able to quench a volcano. In fact there is far more molten magma in the center of the earth than there would be water in all the oceans to quench it; we fortunately are generally protected from most of the earth’s magma by the cooled mantle of

solidified magma we call the earth's surface; most all igneous rocks probably were once part of the earth's central core that bubbled up millions of years ago and cooled at the earth's surface long before the water meteorites were able to create earth's oceans. Almost all of earth's water was sourced from 'outer space', so no wonder water can be found elsewhere in our Solar System and throughout the universe. What sets our planet apart from all other discovered planets is our oxygen, not our water. Harvard-Smithsonian astrophysicists have calculated that there are probably only two hundred planets yet to be analyzed by

our supersensitive telescopic spectrometers to see if any might have traces of oxygen. Of the billions of planets already analyzed, no planet has oxygen outside of Planet Earth, which is why we are so unique in the whole universe. The popular science focus on planets with water is misleading us from what should be the 'real focus' in extraplanetary exploration, oxygen. Oxygen is the necessary element for creating life, not water. If one has oxygen, water can be readily created. But vice versa, that is not the case at life-sustaining temperatures. Only super-hot temperatures can separate oxygen from hydrogen in water, otherwise

that reaction would only result from my metallic potassium experiment, or metallic sodium or lithium, using man-made purified elements, or using man-made voltaic cells. In a lightning strike in our atmosphere, it is largely the nitrogen which reacts; water is an insignificant part of the equation as far as oxygen production is concerned; however a bolt of lightning does have the beneficial effect of producing a small amount of hydrogen peroxide which dissociates back into water, but the oxygen that is released quickly reacts with various organic molecules and dust in our atmosphere, and pure oxygen is never released in measurable

quantities; and if oxygen were released, it would react with other elements so quickly that complex organic molecules would not be formed except in a primordial earth-like atmosphere of a planet that contains a lot of carbon. To find a planet with the necessary amount of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen to form life has so far been completely impossible, and over 99.999 percent of all the universe has been surveyed so far; no planet within thirteen billion light years of Earth matches the necessary conditions for life to exist. We are indeed extremely unique here on Planet Earth. And here is where God chose to have his Son Jesus

Christ born--go figure. God seems to have known what God knew in the first place since God ‘created the heavens and the earth and all therein’, per Genesis 1:1 and Nehemiah 9:6 and Psalm 145:6. So, with very good reason God sent his only son to be born right here on Planet Earth to try to cleanse us of all our sins by dying for us on the cross. John the Baptist announced that fact, and his baptisms were designed to remind people of their sinfulness and to repent; but John the Baptizer was only Jesus’ forerunner. John said, ‘one more powerful than I is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.’

Recall the descending fiery tongues of Pentecost in the book of Acts. The fiery tongues of the Holy Spirit activate and cleanse at the same time. The image of fire is the image of a smelter purifying a metal to get out its impurities by slowly raising the temperature where each impurity melts and pouring off those impurities as they are liberated from the original lump being refined. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives and frees us from our sins, but that changes us for the better, yet we are not always ready to be changed for the better.

Some of our sins have become our favorite pets, unfortunately.

A friend of a friend of mine has been a smoker for years, and recently his aorta split into an aneurysm. But he is not willing to give up smoking. To operate on him would be a problem, since at any time sooner rather than later another vessel could split, and another and another until a fatal consequence could not be avoided. In medical school we always have to ask our patients if they are smokers or if they have ever smoked. The American Lung Association has found that if anyone has smoked only one hundred cigarettes in their

lifetime, their risk for lung cancer is many times that of non-smokers, only one hundred cigarettes in a lifetime is far too many.

And every pregnant woman has to be asked if they have been taking a daily multiple vitamin. And folic acid 400 milligrams per day even before one gets pregnant is one supplement that is absolutely vital to have the best chance for an uneventful outcome.

They didn't have vitamins in John the Baptist's day, so a generous diet of leafy green vegetables for all girls was what was absolutely essential back then to insure having enough folic acid.

But John was not worried about diet. John was worried about the outcome of a person's life. Where are we headed? Are we on course to becoming a witnessing Christian or not? Is our faith making any difference in our life? These are questions John might be asking us today.

Amen.

Description: John the Baptist asks for repentance and declares that a greater one than he is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and a fire that never ends.

Tags: John, Jesus, Christ, baptize, fire, Holy, Spirit, God, unquenchable, potassium, phosphorous, water, planet, life, oxygen, hydrogen, purify, smokers, pregnant, folic, vitamin, aorta, aneurysm, cancer, lung, American, earth, Harvard, Smithsonian, astrophysicists, light, year, lightning, outer, space, Advent, repent, chemistry, laboratory, faith, rocket, ship, pet

And here is another sermon on this Gospel:

Maybe you can find a way to repent, but when I tried, I was pretty much unsuccessful. It was not until I had been somehow miraculously and unexpectedly empowered by God's Holy Spirit that I could even begin the process of "repenting", to be able even to approach the process of 'turning around' something I needed to turn around in my life. And I must admit I have been among those who have glibly suggested that if we just 'add something' into our lives to replace something that

probably needed urgent replacing, that didn't work very well either. If I cut out chocolate, I was constantly thinking "chocolate". And although I could perhaps distract myself from chocolate for a brief while during my actively trying to find something to replace chocolate in my life, I was consumed by thinking about chocolate. Maybe you are different, I don't know, but I can only speak from my own experience.

Now although Advent is not so unapproachably able to call us into some serious rethinking of our lives as perhaps Lent is, Advent in my humble opinion may be a bit of a 'warm up' for Lent, when the

call for repentance becomes even more urgent and desperate and final. So in a way, Advent gives us a moment where we can try out various personal and corporate responses to ‘repenting’ and see if any of our repentance ideas work.

But in my personal experience I could not ‘repent’ on my own, under my own power, using personal effort, without a serious and strategic and even spectacular and miraculous amount of God’s help.

We tend to be caught up in what physicists call “momentum”, the universal tendency to keep doing what we have always been doing or what we have gotten

into a rut doing, living a lowest energy form of life that itself just barely keeps us going from day to day.

A friend of mine several years ago said he had gotten addicted to ice cream, and he consumed a pint or more each and every evening while he was watching television or resting on his sofa after a day or arduous work. In a relative few short months he not only gained many pounds of weight, he also got extremely painful kidney stones from all the calcium he was eating in the ice cream, and also from all the fat that was in the cream. Only when he had to cease completely eating ice cream was he able to

recover from the very painful kidney stone attacks; he had to be able to begin to resist his innate love of ice cream. And some other ways his life was going astray became highlighted to him, by his painful ice cream experience, and he found strength to turn his life around not only physically but spiritually and morally as well.

I think prayer has the potential to help us gain insight about what in our lives needs to be turned around. I don't think prayer alone in and of itself can do that, although I too have been an advocate of that wrong-headed idea as well. But what prayer has done, in my experience, prayer has unwittingly

prepared me for the incoming of God's Holy Spirit in some unexpected way. God alone can turn us around, I believe. I think words and admonitions do not really help so much except to make us feel more or less guilty. But prayer in a mysterious and mystical way prepares us for God's way to become emphasized in our lives, perhaps powerfully emphasized.

In John the Baptist's time people came for John's baptism of repentance, perhaps thinking that the water of repentance, the water of symbolic washing, could 'do the trick' of repenting in their lives. But the water was only able to mark a time in their

lives when they could have become more open to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the Messiah himself into their midst and into their lives. Water baptism itself does not really “save” anyone; water is simply a sign that we have received God’s grace without deserving God’s grace. From that moment on we are depending on God’s Holy Spirit to convert us from within, to conform us into the spiritual beings God intended for us to be. And since most of our baptisms occurred decades ago, even without remembering our infant life baptisms, we have been on a very long journey towards repentance ever since. That same

experience occurs even for adult baptism. At baptism we are ‘marked as God’s own forever’, but most people around us could not really see that that God mark was so very powerful in our lives. Repentance does not automatically precede or proceed from baptism. Repentance becomes a life-long experience of falling down and getting up over and over again, hoping one day to become more than infants in our lives with Christ our Savior and Lord. The present tense of the Greek word for ‘repent’ that John the Baptist used emphasizes that repentance is not a one-time thing, but a

process that begins now and a process of change that continues throughout our lives.

So the Good News of the Gospel is that by our prayers and with the power of the Holy Spirit working on us we first become open to God's calling in our lives, even though we may be resisting mightily God's work on us and God's work in us.

You may have heard the story of the duck preacher preaching repentance to his flock of ducks. The preacher says to his flock, now you can fly, you can fly! You have wings, unfurl them, and fly! And all the duck congregation chimed in, "Yes, we can fly, we can fly, fly, fly!" ...Then all the

ducks waddled back home exactly as they had done last Sunday.

The Greek word for repent is “metanoia” which loosely translated means “changed mind”. This term seems to emphasize that, as we think, we do; and if we think differently, we do differently. There is a perhaps more insightful use of the prefix “meta” before the noun for “mind”, “noia”, which is the following:

“The state of relatively stable or metastable equilibrium is defined as the state in which a system remains for a long period of time, and any slight disturbance causing the system to deviate from the metastable

state does not result in the system passing into another state. As soon as the external disturbance is removed, the system will return into the initial metastable state (Tschoegl, 2000). A sufficiently strong disturbance, however, will put the system out of the metastable state, and the system will pass into a new state of stable equilibrium (Tschoegl, 2000).”

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4657434/>

If I may try to break that definition down: we tend to have a way of reacting to the world that is ‘normal’ for us, the way we reacted for the past several years or months,

and that way of reacting to the world and to those around us may seem to us ‘normal’. But when we ‘repent’, we change our state of being, we actually become a different person in some way. And if something strongly affirms a new direction for our lives, we will change over to that new direction and actually become a different person with somewhat and sometimes dramatically different interests and perspectives on life. But if nothing much happens to us during our period of repentance, then being in our same place with the same people will tend to result in the reversal of our repentance back to our

original state from which we came before we began ‘repenting’. For example, if we make a ‘New Year’s Resolution’ to do this and that, we tend to do that resolve for at least one or two tries; but usually, for most of us, then we will resort back to the way we behaved or acted before we made that resolution, and nothing much actually changes in our life in the long run. This for example is what happens when we resolve, say, to diet; then we begin some perhaps stringent diet that we stay on for a while, but then our old self and our old desires take over, and about ninety-nine percent of

people do not change at all in spite of their resolutions.

However, when repentance lets us see a new way of living that is ultimately preferable, then we have the opportunity to change our lifestyle and move to that new lifestyle. In Christian terms that may happen when we suddenly are moved by the extreme poverty we see somewhere in our neighborhood or elsewhere. Before repentance, we were more or less blind to the situation of others in need. But if we allow our hearts to be moved to compassion for another, and if we begin a series of actions which are consistent with our new-

found concern for others in their needs, then we have the potential for changing our behavior and becoming a new person who cares for more than ourselves and our family and friends; and we even have the potential for becoming change agents in our neighborhood and society. Then we have moved from a “meta” state of mind into a new “frame” of mind which now cares for others as much as we care for ourselves. True repentance in Christian terms actually changes our behavior and may dramatically change the way we see the world about us.

In the Episcopal Church we are now emphasizing “The Jesus Movement”. What

the Jesus Movement means will be a bit different for each person, but at its core is that we begin to have concern for the well-being and well-believing of others, without intruding ourselves on others. We find ways to engage with others in a manner which will open them to see Christ in us, and to help us see Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in others. When this happens, we become “new in the Spirit”, “new in the Lord”, and the kingdom of God expands within us and within our circles of influence.

John the Baptist warned the Pharisees and Sadducees to “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” This is John’s admonition and

instruction to each of us. When we begin and continue to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” then the world, our world, will be changed for the better, for Christ.

Amen.

Addendum:

I saw a dramatic series of photographs taken in a game preserve in Africa about a group of three strong young cheetahs who encountered a herd of impala, both groups some of the fastest running animals on the

planet: “Photographer Michel Denis-Huot, who captured amazing pictures on safari in Kenya 's Masai Mara, said he was astounded by what he saw: " ‘...three brothers (cheetahs) have been living together since they left their mother at about 18 months old,' he said. 'On the morning we saw them, they seemed not to be hungry, walking quickly but stopping sometimes to play together. At one point, they met a group of impala who ran away. But one youngster [of the impala] was not quick enough and the brothers caught it easily'." There were extraordinary scenes that followed “in which the young impala laid down on its haunches, expecting to be quickly dispatched by these strong young cats. But to its own amazement the cheetahs simply patted it on its head and licked its throat, not harming it a bit. And in the final scene the small impala was seen nuzzling the neck of one of the cheetahs before they [dispatched it and consumed it]....”

<http://www.hydmasti.com/2010/09/photographer-michel-denis-huot-captured.html>

Earlier, I had read the partial account and believed these pictures demonstrated one of the predictions we read this morning made some twenty five hundred years ago by the Prophet Isaiah 11:1-10, in whose prophecy of the Last Days we heard: “the leopard will lie down with the kid.”

However, the last photograph in the photographer’s series show the cheetah dispatching and eating the impala.

<http://www.denis-huot.com/sujets/zoom.asp?pre=10665&Num>

[Photo=10666&suiv=10667&Rub=1957&Pere=1033&FULL=ON&LeTheme=1033&ligne=2&Diaporama=&LaPage=1](#)

and

[http://www.denis-huot.com/sujets/zoom.asp?pre=10666&NumPhoto=10667&suiv=10656&Rub=1957&Pere=1033&FULL=ON&LeTheme=1033&ligne=2&Diaporama=&LaPage=1](#)

So Isaiah's prophecy is not being fulfilled, and we are still also missing seeing the wolf living with the lamb, the bear grazing like the cow, the lion eating straw like the ox,

and the snake not harming infants and young children. But the Last Days may still have begun.