

“Let's Get Fired Up!”

Let's pretend you are seated at a table with drawing paper and a box of crayons and markers. You are asked to draw a picture of Christmas. No instructions are given. The choice of setting, scene, and characters is up to you.

Most of the drawings would be predictable. Some would draw MARY on her knees, shielding her eyes from the angel Gabriel's glory as he tells her that she will bear the son of the most high. Some would draw lowly SHEPHERDS flying like leaves in the wind over the Judean hills toward Bethlehem.

Others would draw the brilliant STAR bathing the City of David in it's light, with the silhouette its buildings on the horizon. Many would draw the NATIVITY with swaddled baby Jesus nestled asleep in the hay, surrounded by his befuddled parents, wide-eyed shepherds, gift-bearing Magi from Persia, and the displaced livestock looking in upon the sight. Some of your art would depict Currier & Ives Christmas scenes with horse-drawn SLEIGHS gathered in front of a little New England church-a warm, sentimental setting for Christmas Eve worship. These are the scenes which come to mind when we contemplate Christmas.

Now I want to put you into my drawing. You are in the middle of a desert. There is nothing but sand, rocks, and hills in every direction. In the distance you see people who look like ants appearing then disappearing over the hills. Walking in their tracks, you come to the crest of a hill. Below is the Jordan River. It looks like a long, slithering snake dividing the desert in two. A crowd is gathered at the river. As you get closer, you hear a man's voice. Working your way through the crowd you get to the front and see a strange man swinging a pitchfork and an axe,

hollering himself hoarse, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!!!"

I'm John the Baptist. I'm sure your Christmas pictures didn't include him. John is someone to avoid, yet the church puts him front and center on the second Sunday in Advent with his fire and brimstone preaching about judgment and the necessity of repentance. Whether on paper or in your minds, your picture of Christmas is pleasant. But in Advent, the church won't let you get to those scenes without first dealing with the guy holding the pitchfork. There will be no angels appearing to Mary and the shepherds; no wise men or star, and no Baby Jesus without first going through John.

It's part of our nature to avoid what we don't like. A man walked into a restaurant and asked the cook, "How do you prepare your chickens?" The cook replied, "Nothing special. We just tell them they're going to die." We avoid facing the truth about ourselves. It's scary to have your armor away along with the masks and pretensions that you wear. It is a helpless feeling to be stripped of all your excuses and rationalizations for why you are the way you are. You shudder at the thought of standing naked in the Judge's chambers with nothing to show in your defense but a paltry little handful of goodness you've concocted.

Look at today's Advent picture-John the Baptist, honey stuck to his beard, wearing a gamy-smelling camel hide suit, and crying his lungs out, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; the tree that doesn't bear good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire... Someone is coming with a pitchfork in his hand. He will separate the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

People left the comfort of their homes, the familiarity with Temple religion, the wisdom of Jerusalem's rabbis and teachers, and went into the wilderness IN DROVES to hear a wild prophet warn them about someone about whom he knew precious little. He didn't know his name or what he looked like-only that he was coming to clean shop, to set things right, and with judgment, cut through everything that was wrong like a Bush-Hog cutting

through undergrowth. Why did people flock to hear a tough message like this?

I presume that people like you listen to preachers like me because you don't want to listen to preachers like John. You don't come to hear how hypocritical and faithless and bad you are. You don't come to be told that your, "do-gooder, bleeding heart" righteousness is nothing but filthy rags. You don't come to be threatened, scolded, and frightened by the preacher into becoming a Christian. Maybe you grew up in such a church and decided never to go back, and that's why you are here.

But I've noticed that people aren't flocking to churches that believe everything is fine between themselves and God, and that the purpose of Christianity is to make nice people good, and that the God of Jesus is a hybrid of your beloved Uncle Al and Mr. Rogers.

It may seem odd to our ears, but people seeking God are drawn to Christianity with fire in it. Though they may not use "fire language", they want a combustible faith. When the word "fire" appears in the Bible, we usually think in terms of fire that destroys or the fires of hell. But God takes no pleasure in destruction. God has no contempt for fruitless tress, dead wood, or chaff. Someone observed that:

"God isn't out to get anyone. His problem with people the dead wood represents is that there is no life left in them for the Lord of life to teach. He will judge between those who are on the way and those who are in the way, and all of us shall know ourselves for who we are."

In the Bible, fire indicates the presence of God. Think of Moses' encounters with God, first in the burning bush, then in the pillar of fire, and then on Mt. Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments and the mountaintop seemed enveloped in fire.

John the Baptist didn't know much about the Messiah whose way he was preparing. When Jesus finally arrived John seemed

to have some doubts about him. Jesus didn't act like the fiery figure he had predicted. His brand of judgment was a "kinder, more gentle sort." John's uncertainty is reflected in next week's message, when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one we've been waiting for, or should we be looking for some one else?"

Fire isn't something to play with. It is dangerous, but fire is also creative. It clears the forest floor so new vegetation can grow. It refines impurities from precious metals. It hardens and tempers. It has a transforming purpose which is reflected when we sing, "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mould me, fill me, and use me."

In C. S. Lewis', *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lucy and Susan ask Mr. And Mrs. Beaver about Aslan the Lion. "Is he safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." Mr. Beaver said, "You will, and make no mistake... if there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" the girls ask. Mr. Beaver replied, "Safe? Don't you hear what Mr. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe... but he is good. He is the King I tell you."

The one whose way John prepared... he isn't safe, but he is good.

On Thursday I went to Ohio to the funeral of my cousin, Larry. We were born two months apart. Growing up we did lots of things together, but during high school we went in different directions, and from the time I started college we didn't see each other very often. You could say we were out of touch.

Larry wasn't an achiever. School was something he got through. Along the way he made some bad decisions-- did things that we, on our side of the family, didn't think of doing. For reasons I didn't know at the time, his family never went to church or professed faith of any kind.

There was one thing Larry was good at, and that was cooking. Nineteen years ago he got a job in the kitchen at the Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio, and worked there until he died last Monday, as head of food services. Larry hadn't been well. He had numerous health issues, the most serious resulting in a heart transplant four years ago. He was able to return to work, but the heart he received wasn't a good match, and finally, his body rejected it.

I was glad that I was not like Larry. Over the years I made assumptions about his life and mine, thinking that his life was, please forgive the way this sounds, not what mine was. During the four-hour drive I imagined what sort of funeral it would be, and thought about greeting relatives I had not seen in years. The funeral was at the seminary. I thought it would be a small and simple funeral-- a sad affair, given the circumstances.

When I arrived, the parking lot was jammed. The foyer was packed as people waited to be seated. I heard someone say that over six hundred people had come during the morning visitation. The chapel had three hundred seats, and extras had to be set up to accommodate family, friends, seminary students and faculty, and the seminary board of trustees. Staff members participated in the service. The seminary choir sang, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." The Professor of Pastoral Care said, "For thirty years I've taught students about the love of God, and I've seen some of them practice it. But I can't count the times and ways I saw God's love displayed in Larry's life." Larry's sister and daughter followed in sharing moving tributes.

The President of the Seminary delivered the sermon. He began his presidency the same day Larry began in the kitchen. He told how Larry lovingly fed the bodies and souls of the seminary community. At the conclusion of the hour-and-a half service, Larry's coffin was carried down a long sidewalk that was lined on both sides by members of the seminary community.

As I took it all in, the first verse of Psalm 139 came to mind. "Lord, you have searched me and known me." I had been

discovered. I thought, "It is getting hot in here." No one turned up the thermostat. The heat was coming from the examination light shining on me, revealing my judgmental spirit in sharp detail. My pretense of goodness was stripped away, exposing my damned pride. A part of me was melting from the heat. I was no longer thinking, "Poor Larry." Larry had done just fine. Instead I thought, "Poor David. You have a ways to go."

It is not easy standing before the Judge. Like Aslan the Lion, he is not safe. But he is good, and if we will believe at least this much, then maybe we will trust him enough to let him ignite us. I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

"Here I am, Lord. Tell me the who truth about myself, transform me, baptize me with the Holy Spirit and with fire and damn the torpedoes. I give up trying to figure out how good or bad I am. I give up trying to be God. You be the judge. You be God."

Today's last hymn was the last hymn sung at Larry's funeral- "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Christmas was his favorite time of year, and the third verse was especially appropriate given the physical struggles Larry encountered-- "Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, ris'n WITH HEALING in his wings."

I love this great hymn, but there is another with which we can conclude this message. It is not a Christmas hymn, but it speaks of the desire that we all may have one day.

Lord, I come to Your awesome presence from the shadows into Your radiance; by the blood I may enter Your brightness, search me, try me, consume all my darkness. Shine on me, Shine on me.

Shine, Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory, blaze, Spirit blaze, set our hearts on FIRE...