
Am I a God Nearby?

Jeremiah 23.23-29, Hebrews 11.29-12.2, Luke 12.49-56

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 15, 2010 by Dr Christy Lohr

In today's readings we have seemingly contradictory images – the good company of a cloud of witnesses, and Christ who brings division; a God who is nearby yet who also fills heaven and earth. If you're like me, you might be wondering how these divergent concepts can possibly come together to give us a meaningful word for our lives. Are these things merely reminders of the paradoxes of faith such as God's immanence and transcendence? Or are they telling us something more? I think it's the latter. I see here statements on how we are meant to live, and I think a clue to this manner of reading comes in Jesus' claims of bringing fire, baptism and division. These three images can work together to give us a better understanding of the nature of our relationship with God and the ways God calls us to be in the world. Let's take a look at each of these elements in turn.

First, fire. When we think of fire in a Biblical context, we often associate it with judgment – hell fire or destruction. For example, hail and fire rained down on Egypt when Pharaoh ignored God's commands. Fire can also be a means of purification. The refiner's fire separates the good from the bad, the wheat from the chaff. Fire can represent the presence of God as in the burning bush or the pillar of fire that led the Israelites out of the wilderness. Obviously in some cases, fire is not necessarily a bad thing.

But, there is a fourth element that fire can represent: passion. Think of the phrase “fire in the belly” – by that one means that a person has enthusiasm, zeal. When Jesus says that he came to bring fire, I think he is telling us to get fired up – to become zealous about the type of life he proclaims and wants us to lead. In last week's gospel reading, Jesus said that where one's treasure is there also is one's heart. This is a statement about passion, and Jesus could have just as meaningfully said where one's *passion* lies, there also is her heart. What sparks a fire of passion within you? Are you passionate about material things, or about justice for the poor? Are you passionate about good food, or God's good news?

We can almost hear the answer to these questions in Jesus' lament. “*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*” He sees that a passion for forgiveness and compassion and understanding have not yet taken hold in our lives. If that passion were already kindled, then perhaps Jesus would not have needed to come to us. But it isn't, so he comes.

The ancient story of Prometheus presents another figure who brings fire. You probably remember this from literature class. Prometheus was a Titan who was revered as a champion of mortals and who brought fire to humans. This act was viewed as a betrayal of Zeus who punished Prometheus by having him bound to a rock where he was visited daily by a liver-eating eagle. Since he was an immortal, Prometheus's body regenerated each night, and the eagle returned to devour it anew every day until Hercules killed the bird and released Prometheus from this ordeal. In his anger over the fire incident, Zeus punishes not only Prometheus; he also metes out vengeance on mankind for accepting the gift. This comes in the form of the first woman, Pandora. Pandora is created by committee – all of the gods contribute something to her – and Zeus sends her off as a bride with a wedding present – a jar that, when opened, unleashes all manner of evils upon humankind. She manages to get the lid back on the jar and one thing remains locked inside: hope. In *Works & Days* the Greek poet Hesiod ends his account of these events with a reminder that is not possible to escape the mind of Zeus. This is a warning to mankind of the inescapable nature of God.

To Zeus, Prometheus was a traitor, yet, to humans Prometheus was a hero and an advocate. By bringing fire, he also brought the potential for civilization and advancement. He gave mortals something that previously had belonged only to the gods. This gift, however, came with consequences. Prometheus brings fire and receives punishment in return. Christ brings fire and receives a baptism. Is this also a punishment?

Jesus says, “*I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!*” Jesus was stressed. Other translations of this passage use the word “constrained”. Jesus is “constrained until this baptism is accomplished”. When read alongside the Promethean saga, it is tempting to look for similarities between Jesus’ baptism and Prometheus’ binding.

The baptism that Jesus refers to here is his death on the cross. Just as Prometheus is tied to a rock to suffer for all eternity (and some sources suggest that it was a stake to which he was bound), so Jesus is also bound to a tree and left to die. But, there is a difference between these two stories. Jesus’ proclamation as recorded in Luke is not merely a re-telling of an ancient Greek saga. Instead, Jesus’ proclamation is part of the Christian story of hope and reconciliation.

By bringing fire, Prometheus lessens the gap dividing mortals and the gods, but in the Incarnation, Jesus closes the gap between humanity and God. The difference between Prometheus (who was immortal) and Jesus (who is fully divine and fully human) is that Prometheus’ work for humanity is finished with the gift of fire. With Jesus the work has just begun. Prometheus’ gift to humans represents a rift in the relationship with the gods, but Jesus brings fire to mend the relationship between us and God. At the end of Hesiod’s account of the Greek poem, hope remains locked in the jar, and the question remains among scholars as to whether it stays there in safekeeping for mankind or whether it is locked away from them. In the Christian story, however, we believe the opposite. Through Christ hope is unleashed, and we have only to cling to it with the passion of a burning faith.

John the Baptist says that while he baptizes with water, another will come to baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:16). This is the baptism that Christ brings. Being a disciple of Christ has to do with hope. It involves standing in the fire – just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – and being immersed in the flames of the Holy Spirit. Jesus comes to kindle the fire of God’s love in our hearts and in our lives, and to do that he must be baptized – fully immersed – in the human experience. He must be fully immersed in sin, suffering and death in order to free us from the same. And with that freedom comes hope in a promised future; hope in reunion with God.

So, the fire that Christ brings is a passion for the word of God and for the kingdom that he ushers in through his baptism of death. This is what we hear in Paul’s letter to the Romans where he writes that we were *buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of God, we too may live a new life* (Romans 6:4).

We still have one element left to cover. Christ came to bring fire, baptism and division. Those who burn with a passion for knowing and living out God’s will often find themselves *divided* from those who burn with different passions. Christ brings a new order in which priorities change. This new order replaces fear with courage, desperation with hope, power with humility, and judgment with forgiveness. For those who operate within the present order, Jesus’ presence marks a challenge to their way of being. Those impressed with wealth, status and power will resist the kingdom that Jesus brings. They will distance themselves from his followers. They will mock, flog and scorn those who burn with the passion of the word of God, the passion of faith. In the text from Jeremiah the Lord says, “*Is not my word like fire and like a hammer that breaks rock into pieces?*” There’s that fire, again, but there, too, is the power of God’s word to shake us out of complacency.

Christ comes to free us from the things that bind – to separate us from the systems that oppress and enslave. Addicts on the road to recovery will sometimes talk about the need to distance themselves from people in their past – friends who they are afraid might encourage or enable them to return to old destructive behaviors. They know that holding on to a fragile sobriety might mean division from people with whom they once regularly associated. In a similar way, Jesus challenges us to stand apart from those who don’t value discipleship – those whose hearts are not stirred by the word of God.

While seeking God’s will for our lives – and living into it – might mean a measure of division from those who hold different values, it does not mean that we stand alone. Our reading from Hebrews this morning reminds

that we are accompanied by a great cloud of witnesses who have persevered before us and who cheer us on today.

I imagine this apostolic cheering section to be much like the crowds of bystanders at a marathon. I have a number of friends who have been blessed with a fondness for running long distances quickly. And I have, on occasion, lined up along the marathon route to watch and cheer as they have run by. It can be quite moving to stand in the large crowd with hundreds of other people and offer shouts of encouragement. My hope is always that my voice will make it to the ears of the friend or that perhaps he will pick my face out of the crowd as he races along and that this will provide inspiration to keep going. Have you ever done this – either as a runner or a cheerer? Perhaps you have done it from the sidelines of a child's soccer match, baseball game or swim meet. In the same way, we are encouraged in our faith journeys by the examples of those who have run the race ahead of us.

Last semester I was teaching at the Lutheran seminary in Gettysburg and every week as I drove from my home in New Jersey to Gettysburg, I would pass a billboard on the highway that pictured two men in running clothes in some sort of road race. One man was older, and he was pushing a younger man in a three-wheeled chair designed for racing. The younger man had no legs. The caption on the sign stated, "Dad's been behind him for 65 marathons. Devotion – pass it on." This billboard stuck with me – both for the fact that the father had run 65+ marathons (a feat I think borders on either the miraculous or the insane) and for the implication that he has run many of those races merely for the benefit of his son. He has put himself through extreme physical hardship so that his son could feel the rush of wind on his face and the cheers of crowds in his ears. In the race that is set before us, we, too, are not running alone. We are surrounded by those witnesses who share the faith. They stand before us, beside us and behind us, and sometimes we are the runners, sometimes we are the cheerers, and sometimes we are the ones being pushed.

But, we are not only accompanied by the cloud of witnesses. Remember that ours is a God who is nearby as we read in Jeremiah this morning. "*Am I a God nearby, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? ... Do I not fill heaven and earth?*" God is not a distant, shadowy figure who is detached and removed from creation. Ours is a God who is intimate, present and unavoidable. Ours is a God who shares our lives so intimately that he took on flesh and blood to be among us.

In the Qur'an we are told that God is nearer to us than our jugular veins and that God has appointed two angels to sit – one on each shoulder – to record our deeds. In this way, nothing will escape Allah's watchful eye. God is closer to us than our jugular veins. That's pretty close – and pretty inescapable. For, if we were to distance ourselves too far from our jugulars, then surely we would die. But, at what point does this become too close for comfort? Do we really want a God who sees all that we do, from whom we cannot hide – a God who gets under our skin and into our blood? That kind of closeness can be a little disconcerting. Yet, at the same time, that kind of closeness calls us into lives lived with God in the midst of them. Having God get under our skin and into our blood is not much different from having a fire of passion kindled in our hearts.

God and we are inseparable, and there is great comfort that comes in knowing that we are not alone in our lives or in this journey of faith. Try as we might to distance ourselves from the lives God wants us to lead, we cannot escape the God who fills heaven and earth. Hesiod knew this when he wrote at the conclusion of the Promethean saga that it is not possible to escape the mind of Zeus. Jeremiah knew this when he prophesied about a God nearby whose word was like fire. The apostles knew this when they catalogued the miraculous acts of faith accomplished by the great cloud of witnesses. And we know this when we feel the passion for God's Word burning in our lives. When this flame is kindled, then we, too, join that cloud of witnesses encouraging one another in faith. We are no longer observers standing apart, but we become full participants who speak God's Word faithfully. Today's passage from Luke is Jesus' call for us to *be* the cloud of witnesses – to proclaim the Word of God through our actions and in our lives. We join the race through our baptisms, and if we cannot run it with perseverance, then, like the legless son, we know that there is someone there to push us to the finish line. Amen.