

C Baptism of our Lord 1.13.19

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Focus Statement: Jesus is refining us to be more than we thought we could be.

This week I was listening to a podcast on how language affects how we think about things, and I learned about the term “co-location.” Co-location is when you hear a word and your brain automatically fills in what comes next.<sup>i</sup> So, for example, when I say “coffee,” your brain may automatically fill in the word “hour.” This ability to quickly associate words with other words without even really thinking about it is what makes the Star Wars / church joke, “the force be with you, and also with you” work.

Our brain’s ability to very quickly see and make connections between ideas can be super helpful. It is one of the reasons we continued to exist as a species. Back when our ancestors were roaming the wilds, our ability to catch a glimpse of something, think “saber-toothed tiger” and react accordingly, kept us from being eaten. The problem is the world has moved on from needing to escape saber-toothed tigers, but our brain’s immediate response hasn’t always. So if we stay in that first co-location idea, we can miss the wider nuances of the situation. The dark side of co-location is the same ability that makes the Star Wars joke funny is what allows stereotypes and prejudice to persist. I heard an interview with a police officer about the importance of doing implicit bias training for police. The officer shared how his implicit bias that mass shooters are almost always men almost got him killed when he came around a corner in a shoot-out and was face to face with a woman, who was the shooter.

Listening to the podcast this week about co-location was really timely because I'd been thinking about the concept without a word to define it since part of my sermon last Sunday. Last Sunday I talked about how the Wise Men giving gifts and leaving was an example of a line Mary's Magnificat, about how the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. I loved that connection but I have to share with you; I am not that brilliant. I got the idea from an article by Diana Butler Bass, a leading Christian historian and scholar. I had never linked Mary's magnificat and the gifts of the Wise Men together. When I thought of the hungry being filled and the rich sent away empty, and maybe I took too many political science classes in college, but it was much more class warfare-y in my mind. Which is weird, because I don't see Jesus as being about class warfare, but there you go, co-location is weird. But Dr. Bass instead painted this beautiful picture of generosity, of the rich not having their things forcibly taken from them but giving them up, and receiving in their place gifts of gratitude and love. It was one of those light bulb moments for me to suddenly be confronted with this bias I didn't even realize, and see how God's intention in Mary's song was both more powerful and more hopeful than I had made space for in my mind. So this got me thinking, if I'd made that leap with the magnificat, where else was I missing, completely unintentionally and without realizing it, a fuller understanding of how God's plan in unfolding in love.

Enter John the Baptist. We didn't read the traditional advent texts this year so we missed John's yelling about people being a "brood of vipers... flee[ing] from the wrath to come," but he did in verse seven. So when John started talking about the "chaff burn[ing] with unquenchable fire," that co-location skill in our brains immediately fills in an image of

destruction. Which isn't wrong. This summer's wildfires were a powerful demonstration of the uncontrolled fury fire can unleash. But destructive is not the only thing fire is.

Growing up in the California school system, we learned about the Giant Sequoias. The Giant Sequoias are these massive trees with trunks twenty to as much as thirty feet in diameter.

To protect these natural wonders, the National Parks service got really invested in preventing forest fires, and they were really effective at it. Fire almost completely stopped within the parks. But after a few years of this practice, they started to notice that while the mature trees were still going through their natural life cycle, dropping seed-rich cones, no new trees were sprouting. One of the things wildfire does is it burns out all the brush that gathers on the forest floor, cleaning it essentially. So at first, the scientists thought maybe the seeds were sprouting, the tiny seedlings just could make their way through all of the accumulated debris. But even clearing the brush, still no seedlings emerged.

After more research, scientists discovered a surprising thing. Those seed cones only opened to release seeds in the heat of a wildfire. That heat is what triggers the seedcone to know, the brush has been cleared away, rich, nutritious ash remains, and this combination of cleared space, access to sunlight, and nutrient-rich soil is now the perfect place for a new tree to root. For the Giant Sequoia, the destruction of a fire is the birthplace of new life.

Another common image in scripture is that of a "refiners fire." Fire is how metals like iron, steel, copper, even gold are made. Ore, rock and sediments which contain the mineral base, are superheated, burning away the unwanted material and forcing the mineral itself to go

through a chemical transformation, leaving the desired metal in its place. And here's your, or at least my fun fact for the day, because this was an interesting thing I learned while reading for this sermon that I didn't know. With the exception of gold, which mostly comes as gold in nature, most metals aren't metals in their natural state, they're mineral deposits. To create the iron, copper, lead, silver, what have you, the minerals have to undergo a chemical reaction and be transformed. The most basic way to provoke this chemical transformation is through heat. That's the refiners fire the prophets Zechariah and Malachi talked about. It's not just about getting rid of the impurities; it's about an actual transformation from one way of being to another.

And back to our saber-toothed tiger dodging ancestors, humanity's ability to understand and control fire is another reason we still exist as a species. Fire, our ability to make it and control it, is what allowed us to cook and store meat. Plenty other animals are meat eaters, but we are the only ones who can keep it, who can carry it with us. Fire burns away the unhealthy bacteria in meat as well, making it safe for us to eat. Fire also allowed us to spread into colder regions of the planet than our generally furless, not cold resistant bodies would have permitted us to survive. Destruction, regeneration, purification, transformation, warmth, stability, and protection, all of these different purposes and ideas are layered into John the Baptist's message of how Jesus will come with "unquenchable fire."

How do we know this? From the second part of this morning's Gospel reading. Luke described how when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, a voice from heaven said,

“You are my Son, the Beloved.” You. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is baptized, Jesus put on flesh at all, so that what is true for him is also true for us. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, we can replace ‘you’ with our own names. When the Angel Gabriel said to Mary, “you have found favor with God,” we are the ones in God’s favor. When the angel said to the shepherds, “to you is born this day... a savior,” we are the ones for whom a savior has been born. And when that voice from heaven spoke to Jesus, “You are my child, the beloved,” that too is us. Throughout Luke’s gospel, we will see Jesus again and again going to those who are overlooked and left out, to confirm again and again that no one is left out of God’s love. And an expanse this great, is too broad for only one definition of fire.

Dear friends, in the waters of baptism, we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. A fire that destroys the chaff in our souls, that burns away the impurities, that regenerates, that transforms, that warms, that protects, that guards, that loves us into newness. Thanks be to God, who is all things. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> "Sexism in Language" 4 January 2019. Stuff Media LLC.

<<https://www.stuffmomnevertoldyou.com/podcasts/sexism-in-language.htm>> 9 January 2019.