*A PRESENCE TO KNOW*

Luke 3:7-18

Isaiah 6:1-8

December 12, 2021

When the Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin returned from his orbit around the globe, he made the comment that he didn’t see God anywhere out there in outer space. Out of the remark, Communist leaders learned something about America and Christianity. According to an item reported in Theology Today, they were surprised to find that Americans (and in particular, reputable Christians) were rather amused with Gagarin’s snickering remark. It surprised them to learn that Christians never expected an astronaut to wave at God or bump into His kingdom as he orbits the earth.

Well, O.K. That’s our position. But where then? And how? Where and how will we see the coming of the Lord? I want us to look closely for a bit at the passage from Luke. Here’s John the Baptist storming at the Jews, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” John thunders on, “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees, every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!”

And the crowds huddle together and tremble. “What then, shall we do?” So John fixes them with a steady gaze and says, “He who has two coats, let him share with the one who doesn’t have any, and he who has food, likewise.” And to the tax collectors and soldiers, he says, “Don’t extort or bully or intimidate the people just because you can, by your profession.” And the crowds were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah.

Why were they waiting with such baited breath, looking first at one and then the other, hoping against hope with each glance? What had John said that hooked them so, and filled them with such anticipation?

It’s as if he had shaken them up and gotten their attention, with “You brood of vipers.” They cringe and say, ‘What should we do, what should we *do*?’ And when John says, “You have two coats? give that one over there one of them. You a soldier? Don’t go bullying and terrifying folks to gain power over them.” And the people perceive they’ve just heard great wisdom. It seems the kind of wisdom to me that would be exactly what they knew to do anyway. But it had a clarity, a purity, a precision of purpose that catches you with its simple force. . . you know . . . like you and I sometimes feel in the presence of a powerful preacher.

No one had ever touched them so deeply before, or offered them such a clear vision of what to do now. So they wondered, full of anticipation, “Is this John the Messiah? Could he be?”

I think that reaction was understandable. But what’s really amazing to me when I get down and think about is, is what John says,

I am baptizing you with water, but he who

is mightier than I is coming, and he will

baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire!

Let’s set those side by side. “I am baptizing you with water” . . . . “The mightier one coming will baptize with Holy Spirit.” Baptize with water, as a sign of what? Repentance, huh? Baptize with Holy Spirit, as a sign of what? Well, I’m not really sure! Maybe we can find this out.

One was water—plain, common, ordinary. And the other is Holy Spirit and fire—uncommon, extraordinary. Baptize you with water: a sign of repentance and a changed life. But with Holy Spirit and fire . . . . If the one is repentance and a changed life . . . and that’s COMMON, ORDINARY (!) what is THIS??

The comparison is discontinuous. There is a magnitude leap of distance, and substance, and effect. I baptize you with water, to denote something sacred, a changed life. But He comes with a baptism of Holy Spirit and FIRE! How much more awesome is this? When He comes, you and I will have been in the very presence of the *HOLY*.

Boy, if that doesn’t raise the hackles of your expectancy! If they were wondering, full of anticipation, about John, think how you and I should be about Jesus! Filled with a palpable, trembling eagerness your body and spirit can’t seem to contain. And why? Because when he comes, you and I will have been in the presence of the HOLY.

Frances Chesterton, in her poem, asks, ”How far is it to Bethlehem?” She answers, “Not far.” Geographically, no. Modern transportation has made our world very small, indeed. It is only a matter of hours to the remotest of place on earth.

Yet, spiritually, we are so frighteningly far from Bethlehem. Any day’s headlines prove that. Another contemporary poet says, “Along the pathways of the stars we toil towards the moon and Mars.” (Sound like Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin?) “Good God,” he continues, “have we lost our mind in leaving Bethlehem behind?”

If John’s baptism of water comes with shouting and cowering and tearful (even fearful) repentance, what does the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire come with?

The truth of it is that Bethlehem is uphill, and not many of us are aware of the climb. It is more difficult to ascend the hill to Bethlehem than to rocket into space. We stumble over the rocks of pleasure, and warfare, and small-mindedness, and they-aren’t-me mindedness. And we keep rolling back down to the bottom. Just like those who are too busy with trade and taxes and the mad rush of things to find room for the child in the cattle stall, you and I can’t find time or space to ascend the hill of the Lord. The Mighty One, the One who is coming with the baptism of Holy Spirit and fire, He is calling the people of this church to lofty heights, to breathe in the pure air of the spiritual, to view the world from heaven’s perspective.

Viewing the world from the perspective of heaven. Filled with the coming of the HOLY. What’s it like? Moses wanted to know, too. Now, Moses had heard the voice of God out of the bush that burned but wasn’t consumed. He’d seen the Red Sea roll back upon itself. He’d handled and tasted manna, the very bread of God. Yet he craved the ultimate spiritual experience. He inquired of the Lord, “Let me see Your face. Show me Your glory.”

But the Lord said, “I will cause my goodness to pass in front of you, and I

will proclaim my name, YAHWEH, in your

presence. But you cannot see my face,

for no one may see me and live.”-

Then the Lord said, “There is a place

near me where you may stand on a rock.

When my glory passes by, I will put you

in a cleft in the rock and cover you with

my hand until I have passed by. Then I

will remove my hand and you will see my

back, but my face must not be seen

(Ex. 33:19ff).

Even so, when Moses returned ot the camp, his face shone. He had been in the presence of the *holy*. But the people were terrified. Moses’s face was too dazzling or them to bear. So Moses put a veil over his face so the people could approach him.

Maybe the glorifying dazzle had to be veiled then, but Paul says, “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.”Baptized with Holy Spirit and with fire? Paul continues, “Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (Get a glimpse of what great thing John the Baptist was pointing us to?) And we all, with unveiled face, *beholding the glory of the Lord*(!) are being changed into His likeness . . .. from one degree of glory to another. In the presence of the HOLY.

[On one hand] baptized with water. [On the other hand] changed from one degree of glory to another; beholding the Lord. Discontinuous and magnitudes apart from what John could ever seal with his baptism of water.

Isaiah beheld the Lord:

I saw the Lord, sitting upon a throne high

and lifted up. And the skirts of his robe filled the temple.

(Do you feel the blessing and well-being

that comes when even the skirts of his robe touch the temple? . . . .

but his skirts FILLED the temple)

And above him stood the seraphim. And one called to another

(As if they were sharing an awesome,

outstanding truth in common)

[one called to another] “Holy Holy Holy

is the Lord of hosts;

heaven and earth are full of His glory.

(And the foundations of the thresholds

shook with His voice. And the house

was filled with incense.)

The crux of the message is the song of the seraphim. The song is the repetition of the single word, HOLY. Three times the word is sung in succession, giving the church its most august anthem. Now, I don’t want you to miss the significance of holy, holy, holy. In English, when we want to emphasize something, we underline it or put it in capital letters (you should see how much underlining and caps I have in my manuscript!), or we use important adjectives: the seraphim were sharing an awesome outstanding truth)

However, in Hebrew, emphasis is made by repetition. (“For three reasons and for four I will cut you off from the land of the living.” Or, “Your Lord shall come to you riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.” From last week, even:

And suddenly there will come to the temple

The Lord whom you seek

And the messenger of the Covenant

whom you desire.

Repeat it to emphasize it. But only on a handful of occasions does the Bible repeat something to the third degree. To repeat something three times raises it to the superlative. And the seraphim say the Lord of Hosts is Holy Holy Holy.

Isaiah stood in the presence of holy holy holy God, Who was high and lifted up. Moses’ face dazzled because he had stood in the presence of the holy God. He had to cover himself up with a veil. But that was the era of John’s baptism with water.

Today, in these next two weeks, the Lord is coming, and we all, with unveiled face, *beholding the glory of the Lord* (!) are being changed. From one glory into another. The coming of the Lord ushers you and me into the place where He sits, high and lifted up, and the skirts of His robe fill the

temple, and you and I are privileged to say “The Lord is holy, holy holy.

That’s Christmas. That’s the coming of the one mightier than I. That’s the reality shown by a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Are you on fire? Me too.

Amen.