

“The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire; the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; * the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.” Ps. 29:7

I watched one of my sons make a fire in the woodstove last week. He carefully loaded in kindling, and then larger chunks of wood, and lit the fire with a match and closed the door. The design of the stove is simple and effective. It starts right up and there is a blessing of light and heat as it brings warmth to much of the house when it’s blazing.

It takes one match to get the whole load of wood burning, and then what we get is very warm and lifegiving, but also potentially quite dangerous. When humans first learned how to make a fire inside a structure to warm themselves they were inviting the danger of the flame right into the very heart of the place where fire can do massive damage if out of control; burn down the house, and kill the people who live there.

It only takes one match. When I first started thinking about using this illustration for my sermon today my thoughts were about Jesus being the match to start the fire of faith, hope and love in our hearts. That conflagration has ignited faith around the whole world. Like the story Jesus tells about the mustard seed growing into a large bush, or the small amount of yeast used to make many loaves of bread, Jesus told us that the Kingdom of God is like that. (Luke 13:18-20)

On Wednesday in the Christian church around the world, The Epiphany of our Lord was celebrated. Matthew is the Gospel writer who tells us the story of the three wise men from the East coming to visit the baby Jesus in his manger after hearing in prophecy that a star would guide them to the place where the new Messiah of the world had been born. **The star stopped over the place where the child lay. (Matt. 2:9)** It has been a beautiful story and image for us. It helps us understand that the true light which guided the Magi was the light of Christ.

But we were told of danger within that beautiful story. The danger was of a man, King Herod the Great, who wanted to retain his hold on power as the Roman-appointed King of Judea. Among other things, Herod erected a golden eagle at the entrance of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Roman symbol in the most sacred place of the Jews was just one of the things that did not make him popular with his Jewish subjects.ⁱ For Herod, seeing the star, as Matthew tells us, was not a sign of wonder. Instead, that star, and what the wise men told him, made him fearful that a new ruler would come to displace him, and take away his power and prestige.

But this year in the United States the Feast of the Epiphany was overshadowed by another event that seemed to start with one match. On Wednesday, January 6, on our TVs and phones, we saw

a conflagration in our Nation's Capital. Anger and hostility were burning out of control. Can anything good ever come from a mob armed with bats and guns? Democrats and Republicans alike have repudiated the unprecedented acts of violence and attempted destruction of our sacred Capitol building on Wednesday. How strange that The Feast of the Epiphany got barely a mention on Wednesday.

And today, when our country is still reeling from the events of the last week, we have another religious celebration which most people in our country will not hear about. Today is the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. We again have white on the altar as a symbol of the significance of this day in the life of our church. White symbolizes the coming of the Holy Spirit, which rested on the head of the young man, Jesus as he allowed himself in all humility to be baptized like any other human being by John the Baptizer at the Jordan River. The ministry of Jesus began that holy day. Mark tells the story of the baptism very briefly, but because there are few words, the ones that are on the page hold even more significance. **“And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart...”Mark 10:10**

Mark wants us to know that it was not a gentle parting of the clouds and a light breeze. No, God tears apart the heavens and comes down. We know that wind and fire are the telltale spiritual signs that God is not going to stay aloof and far away. God is going to tear the heavens apart and come to us, come within us as a flame of inspiration as on the Day of Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Spirit.

It's just important to remember that fire that keeps us alive through its ability to warm us, also endangers us. We must be very careful with this powerful force and resource.

The Spirit filled Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit filled the disciples at their Pentecost moment, and the Spirit has been given to each of us at our baptism too. Haven't our hearts burned within us by the grace of God throughout our years? Sometimes that faith is strong and we feel connected to God by the Spirit, and sometimes our faith becomes more dim due to factors within and without us. That fire that once burned brightly needs to be fed fuel in order to keep alight.

The experiences we have seen and heard about the difficulties in Washington this week may make some people lose faith in humanity, and faith that God is with us through the Spirit. It's one thing to get a fire going, and it's another to keep it going. We run out of wood, or we have no axe to cut and split more wood. The chimney or stovepipe becomes clogged, full of soot, or, God forbid, creosote deposits catch on fire. So many things can go wrong. But we must focus our attention on our faith in order to be able to help one another at difficult times in our country.

Jesus came to us from God. Jesus was filled with the Spirit at his baptism, and Jesus has given **us** the power of the Spirit. Jesus has also given us the tools and the fuel to keep that fire of faith burning to give us warmth and light. And Christ's warmth and light can heal, can inspire and can love; ourselves and others. Attend an online service like this one, pick up your Bible and your prayer book and read them, have a conversation with God today, and reach out in love to someone in need. These are the things that keep our holy flame going.

"Love must act as light must shine and fire must burn." Part of the Rule of Life of the Anglican Benedictine Monastery of Holy Cross in West Park, NY.

ⁱ Wikipedia, "Herod the Great"