

FIRE OF THE PHOENIX

TEXT: Luke 3:15-17

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on November 7, 2021

I lived for a while in San Antonio, Texas. There was a little boy in my apartment complex who used to come and visit me almost every day because he loved my dog. The little boy...maybe five or six years old...had no hair and his face was disfigured. He always wore long pants and long-sleeved shirts, no matter how hot it was. And San Antonio gets mighty hot.

One day a knock came on my door. I opened it up and a little person stood there completely wrapped in bandages—head to toe like a mummy with just little slits for eyes, nose, and mouth. “Bet you don’t know who I am!” came the little voice I knew so well. I pretended I didn’t and we had a good laugh.

He was there in San Antonio because of the excellent burn unit in their hospital, and every so often he had new skin grafts and treatment and came out looking like the mummy on my doorstep. I asked him one day how he had gotten so burned. He was playing with matches on his bed. Fire is a dangerous thing. He was lucky to be alive.

Yet the harnessing of fire at the dawn of human civilization is the measure by which all other innovations are judged. With fire we keep warm, cook, maintain industry, set a mood, purify metal. Forest fires can be horribly destructive, but they are also necessary to the ecology of an area, clearing out underbrush and fertilizing soil with the ashes. The giant redwoods in California will not open up and drop their seeds without the blazing heat of fire.

Just as fire is a complicated symbol in life, so it is in Christian faith. God takes the form of a burning bush to talk with Moses and is described in passages of Scripture as a “consuming fire.” God leads the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of fire. Fire is also a purifying agent in the Bible, and that is one meaning of the passage Rosemary read from Luke. John the Baptist baptizes with water. He starts people out on the Christian journey. But Jesus baptizes with the fire of the Holy Spirit...a fire that purifies us across the rest of our lives, making us each day better suited for the presence of God.

By the time of Jesus, fire was also a symbol for the domain of Satan and his demons. That image of a fiery hell comes from a place of actual fire, a valley just below Jerusalem called the Valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna in Hebrew. It was in this valley that the ancient Canaanites once sacrificed their children by throwing them into the fire. Once Jerusalem came under Israelite control, they felt the valley had been so tainted by the evil of child sacrifice that it should not be used for anything good. It became the trash heap for Jerusalem, where the continual fires of trash burning in Gehenna became a suitable symbol for the home of ultimate evil.

Fire is part of the official symbol of the United Methodist Church. The flame that wraps around the cross in our insignia is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, which the Bible tells us filled the disciples on Pentecost in the form of tongues of flame. And yet many are now pointing out that the symbol is too close to the burning cross used by white supremacists and should be changed. Given the complicity of the church in white supremacy across the centuries, I would gladly endorse a different symbol.

Many times, the flame of the Holy Spirit is paired with another symbol of God's spirit—the dove. And once you get a bird and fire close together, it's a short leap to one of the oldest enduring legends on earth—the legend of the Phoenix. There are many versions of the legend across many ancient cultures and the origins are uncertain. I cast my vote with those scholars who believe the origins come from ancient Egypt, about 8 centuries before the birth of Christ when the head of the Egyptian pantheon was the sun god, Ra.

The Phoenix is described as, a large and ancient bird with magnificent feathers of gold and purple, red and orange and yellow. It is not a species. There is only one. In some versions it lives for a thousand years, in others it is five hundred. In all of them the bird is found in the Arabian desert for at least most of its life. And as it gets to either the 500 or 1,000-year mark, it flies to its home, collecting bark and spices as it goes, tucking all of it into its massive feathers. Upon arrival, the Phoenix uses all it has gathered to build a nest and settles in. Then the Phoenix sings a majestic and beautiful song of praise to the god of the sun, who responds with a searing heat that sets the nest on fire. The incense of the bark and spices mingles with the smoke of the great bird, as its colorful feathers become indistinguishable from the tongues of flame. Until all that is left is ash.

And then, out of the ashes, arises a new, fledgling Phoenix, who carefully collects the ashes of its former self and molds them into an egg-shaped sac. The reborn Phoenix then carries the egg sac to the Egyptian city of Heliopolis and gives it as an offering to the god of the Sun. And the cycle begins again. Not an immortal bird; but a bird that is forever renewed by sacrificing itself to the author of life with songs of praise and the full and certain knowledge that it will be rewarded with new life.

The legend of the Phoenix was known to the earliest Christians, and the early Church Fathers were quick to add that it took three days for the new Phoenix to emerge and put it into their writings as a parable of Christ's death and resurrection. I'm kind of surprised they didn't have the bird sing, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." In those early days of Christian faith no one was yet hunting for heretics or parsing the fine details of a creed that would try to precisely define the nature of the godhead. Those earliest Christians and theologians knew what all ancient cultures knew: There is nothing that teaches the truths of life better than a good story. Our first hymn this morning prayed that "the blazing Phoenix spirit" of God would resurrect the church.

It's not about the facts. Nobody went around shrieking that there really was no such bird and it was all a made-up lie. People from China to Egypt to Rome and beyond all knew the truth of the legend of the Phoenix as soon as they heard it. Christians heard the legend and instantly said, "Yes! Exactly this. If you want to understand the life and death of

Jesus, just enter the desert and hitch a ride on the back of the Phoenix. The messenger is different, the god is speaks of is different, but the truth it tells is the same: To live we have to be willing to die. To have a long, fulfilling life we have to spend it in loving service to something greater than ourselves.”

I often wonder whether Jesus himself knew the legend. If you remember the story of Jesus’ birth, after the wise men told Herod they were searching for the King of the Jews, Herod ordered the slaughter of all boys under the age of two. Mary and Joseph got word of that and fled the country, taking the baby Jesus with them to Egypt, where they lived as refugees until Herod’s death about five years later. Would it even have been possible for Jesus to have lived in Egypt as a young child and not heard the legend of the Phoenix, a story which had already been told in that land for at least 800 years?

Wouldn’t John the Baptist have heard of the Phoenix as he made his life out in the desert wilderness that all cultures described as its home? Was it in the back of John’s mind as he told the crowds gathered for baptism that someone more powerful was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire and then, just six verses later, the Holy Spirit takes the form of a bird that descends upon Jesus at his baptism?

I don’t know the answer to any of those questions; but I do know that being able to recognize that Truth, with a capital T, is a much bigger and richer category than facts, blows open the Bible and its stories in far more interesting and relevant ways. Jesus taught in parables—which are fictional stories meant to teach truth—for a reason. The Old Testament is filled with similar stories as an ancient people tried to make sense of their world, their God, and the triumphs and tragedies of their own lives.

Some of it happened. Some of it didn’t. Our job isn’t to try to figure out which is which but rather to recognize that the stories that have been preserved and handed down to us contain big T Truth. Legend-of-the-Phoenix truth. The truth told in earth and air, water and fire, sin and redemption, death and resurrection. A little boy in San Antonio learned some of the truth of fire the hard way. But for those little ones who didn’t make it; or for those who have come to the fullness of years and fly home to their nest to sing one last song; there is One who comes to baptize with the spirit and with fire, as a beautiful bird descends from heaven, a spirit that stays with him until it is offered back from an old-rugged cross before rising again to new life.

Is there really such a bird, such a fire, such a transformation? The legend has been reborn now for 3,000 years. You tell me. Amen.