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Fire and Light

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Years ago I heard that if you were ever in a place where someone was going to rob you at gun point, it was best to give them whatever they asked for. If, however, you were in a position to call for help, the best thing to shout out is not “Help!” but rather, “Fire!”

Just the mention of fire causes people to stop what they are doing and pay attention to what is going on. So powerful is the word “fire” that Oliver Wendell Homes, in rendering a verdict about free speech in 1919, said that free speech is not extended to someone having the right to cause unnecessary panic in a crowded theater by yelling, “Fire!”

Fire, and the light that comes from fire, have been powerful symbols, both literally and metaphorically, in every religious and spiritual system we have any record of.

Judaism virtually begins the march toward freedom from bondage in the episode where Moses sees a bush burning in the desert, a bush that is not consumed by the fire. He draws near and is told to take off his shoes because the place where he is standing is holy dirt. And, he is given God’s name, “I am, who I am.”

If you are familiar with the daily spiritual practice of Jews, it is a family or communal experience that begins with the lighting of candles.

We are right now, in the Jewish calendar, in the season of Hanukkah. Hanukkah is a Hebrew word that means “Festival of Lights.” Hanukkah is an eight day celebration that began this year on December 16 and will end on Christmas Eve when Jews celebrate a decisive victory that you can read about in the books of Maccabees. The Maccabees successfully rebelled against Antiochus Epiphanes. During this siege the Temple was purified and the wicks of the menorah miraculously burned for eight days, even though there was only enough sacred oil for one day’s lighting. This took place somewhere around 165 B.C.

In Christian liturgical worship - Eastern, Roman, Anglican and what is called “high church” Protestant - the worship service begins with the acolytes - formerly known as “taper bearers” - bringing lighted candles down the center aisle to the altar and lighting the menorah beginning in the center and going out. This symbolizes the light of Christ coming in to illumine both the place and the people gathered. At the end of the service the acolytes extinguish all but the tapers they carry and exit the church. The symbolism of this is that the light of Christ goes into the world and is for everyone.

During this Advent Season there are special rituals at the beginning of each service. The sanctuary is in a darkened condition. The choir processes down the side aisles with candles lit. Then the congregation begins to sing, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Then a family or group of people come and light candles on the advent wreath.

A candle is lit and an additional one each Sunday leading up to Christmas Eve.

The part of the Christmas Eve service that seems to be the most appealing to most people is the lighting of candles at the end of the service. The entire sanctuary is plunged into darkness with the exception of the Christ Candle staying lit. The congregation begins to sing “Silent Night” and the clergy light candles from the Christ Candle and then pass this light on to members of the congregation going down the center aisle and out across the church, into the choir and balcony. It is a very moving experience.

In the Christian tradition joy and celebration continues to mark the worship ritual until the Lenten Season culminating in the Maundy Thursday Service. At the end of that service, after the striping of the altar - which is a powerfully dramatic ritual in itself, all the lights in the sanctuary are extinguished except that same Christ Candle and in a very dramatic moment the minister with a mighty breath blows that candle out plunging the sanctuary into today darkness.

You get the point: fire, and the light that comes from fire, plays a major role in the ritual of the Jewish and Christian worship rituals.

Fire and light play a prominent role in so-called secular culture as well. One of the episodes of the PBS program I mentioned in here a couple of weeks ago, “How We Got To Now,” was about light and the indispensable role the creation of artificial light and everything connected to it transformed - these talks are all about transformation - our culture.

Just think of all the time, money and energy that we put into Fourth of July “fire-works” and in Christmas lights and lighting. I mentioned seeing a house so decorated that not a square inch of the house was not covered in Christmas lights.

Here is the teaching we have gotten to for today:

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I have thrown fire on the world. Look! I watch until it blazes.

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The first thing I want to be clear about this teaching is that it has nothing to do with the hellfire that is so popular in evangelical Christianity where people are going to be sent to a hell of eternal fire and the earth is going to be destroyed by fire.

If you ever were to encounter a true mystic or read one of the true mystical writings, one of the hallmarks of their lives and work is that they fell in love with Sacred Mystery. How could you ever fall in love with or trust yourself to one who, unless you believed and did the right thing, would condemn you to an eternity of hellfire?

Now, I am not encouraging you to actually read one of the mystics. Say, John of the Cross.

(Here is a link to an article about this Spanish mystic - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of_the_Cross)

One of his works, which is considered a masterpiece of poetry in the Spanish language is given the title “Dark Night of the Soul.” How depressing can you get?!

The poem is about the painful experiences people endure as they see to grow in spiritual maturity. Who wants to suffer? When it comes to our religion or religious and spiritual practices, we don't want to suffer, we don't want to be offended and we don't want to lose control.

Beside, studying mysticism and mystical texts are just difficult, mind numbing and boring. At least at the dualistic level this is true. I remember my teacher giving me the assignment of reading "The Cloud of Unknowing." I bought it and took it home and sat at my desk with it. I was so excited. I was just beginning my professional life, in my early thirties. I opened that book and within a page and a half said, "This won't preach." I was looking for material I could use and this stuff would not draw a crowd.

Years ago I listened to Jim Finley, a man I consider to be a true mystic in our time. His spiritual teacher was Thomas Merton and he has written the definitive biography of Merton titled "Merton's Palace of NoWhere: A Search for God Through Awareness of the True Self." It is in this book that Finley says non-duality cannot be taught, it cannot be communicated. Rather, it communicates itself.

At any rate, I sat listening to this mystic teacher. He is an authority on St. John of the Cross. "John of the Cross" is not his given name. Rather, it is one he took. (Read the article.) Finley would cite the places in the works of John of the Cross he was teaching to us from. He would read a passage and say this is from Assent of Mount Carmel, Chapter 2 paragraph 14. Either because of his pronunciation or my hearing difficulties it took me days to understand what he was saying: Ascent of Mount Carmel.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ascent_of_Mount_Carmel)

I am not encouraging you to read these works. They are massive and dense. You may think I am saying these as some sort of reverse psychology. You know like the foxy character in Uncle Remus who begged not to be thrown into the briar patch. Reading these works, beginning with Finley's work on Merton, is jumping off into the deep end of the pool. I once heard someone say that when it comes to religion in America, all the noise comes from the shallow end of the pool.

So don't undertake reading one of these works now. Wait until you are sitting in that wheel chair at the end of the hall in the old folks home. If you are lucky to make it that far. I heard Finley say, "Senility and enlightenment are in a race for the finish line."

Of course, there is a Zen saying: If you don't enter the lion's den, you will never capture the lion. But, be that as it may.

What are we to make of this saying?

"I have thrown fire on the world. Look! I watch until it blazes."

What does it mean?

What is its relevance for us?

Let's begin here:

There are basically four world-views.

One is the materialistic world view. This is the one we are, without choice, immersed in 24/7. The religion of our culture is not only consumerism but also what is pounded into our heads is "the bottom line." What is real is what you can measure and, if you are "successful," manage.

Jesus was clear in his teaching that one cannot serve two masters but many of us certainly attempt to do so.

I was stunned when I first heard one of my spiritual teachers say that anyone with this world view is an atheist at the practical level. People with this world view may profess to be religious, even have a "personal relation to Jesus" and see this as a "Christian nation" but it is practical atheism. The God of Jesus has nothing to do with this world view.

The Jesus pictured for us in the Gospel of Thomas teaches resolute refusal to trust in the false securities of dogma, authority or worldly or conventional religious

rules of conduct. These things cannot put one onto a path of authenticity where we can surrender to the birth of a reality in us that makes us revolutionary agents of its birth in reality. More about that in a moment.

The second world view is that which is called "spiritual." In our lifetime a lot of what has been called "new age" religion is this. This point of view has been labeled as heresy in every generation since the death of Jesus. All that matters is what you can't see.

The third world view is the theological/religious world view. Here is where people try to put things back together and cram God back into the world. I hear it every Christmas and so do you - put the Christ back in Christmas. As if God were ever gone from the world.

There is another world view entirely. The Buddhists have it perfectly put in their notion of non-dual mind. But, it is in Christianity as well. The mystics knew it. It is the incarnational world view. This is the one that says spirit and matter were never separated. The mistake early Christians made was to say that this was new in Jesus and only in Jesus. Whereas Jesus said that what he taught was what had been always true and was true of everyone one..

I have seen, and perhaps you have as well, many art depictions, from the era where mysticism was more embraced than in ours, of Jesus holding up two fingers. He wasn't making the peace sign. He was saying, "I and God are one. And so are you."

The job description of any authentic religion is to teach this, to make one out of two.

It is fire Jesus throws on the world - and keeps throwing. It is the fire of a revolutionary transcendent and, at the same time, intimately personal knowledge of a love that menaces all the world's political, social, economic, and religious structures and divisions and all the self-serving justifications for keeping things the way they are

Keep in mind that the Jesus of Thomas is a revolutionary mystic. He knows that he has discovered and been discovered by a powerful secret; a potentially all-

transforming power of love in action. He is committed to seeing that its unleashing upon the world and the transfiguration of the fire of its truth takes place.

Developing the willingness and ability to see the truth of this teaching demands, however, that we “wake up.” Hence the command in the teaching, “Look!” This “looking,” this “waking up,” this seeing “what is,” is extraordinarily difficult, painful and full of anxiety. This is why so few people do it. Yes, yes, I know most of us think we are awake and see but most of us, myself included, see “what is” through our prejudices.

Think of it this way: If you were blind, all the explanation in the world of the color yellow would give you nothing but the explanation of the color yellow, not the experience of seeing it. In the same manner we are tempted to think that our ideas about God, whatever they might be, are God. That’s prejudice. Prejudice is the belief that our ideas about people are the truth about people. That’s the same way the vast majority of people, especially people who call themselves religious, are about God. They think their ideas about God are God. Mystics know better.

Jesus was a Jewish mystical teacher - among other things.

A mystic is one who has gone through a profound transformational experience from which they emerge with a profound sense of oneness with the Sacred. Afterwards, people can sense that there is something different about them. They usually attract followers who want something of what they sense the mystic has. Here is the rub. Mystical means something hidden, something that cannot be talked about except perhaps in poetry and metaphor.

Jesus has a mystical experience at the beginning of his ministry. When he emerges he says, “I have met a God who is the God of everyone. Also though I am not this God I am not other than this God either. Further,” he went on, “this is true of you as well.” Wow! This is powerful stuff! And, destructive to our ways of thinking and being. Jesus is a divine pyromaniac and calls us to share his passion.

For the mystic division and fragmentation lose their tyranny.

There is a great, to me story I got years ago. God and Satan are out for a walk together one day. As they go along, God spots something in the road and bends down and picks it up. Satan says, "What have you got there?" God holds up what he has picked up and says, "This is Truth." Satan says, "Here. Give it to me. I'll organize it for you." He did. It's called systematic theology.

One of my favorite Zen teaching stories is about the frustrated monk who goes to his master to complain about the difficulties involved in the practices that have been given to him. He asks his master, "Is there anything I can do to achieve enlightenment?" His teacher says, "No. No more than there is anything you can do to make the sun come up in the morning." "Then why the hell do you have me doing all these difficult practices?" The master quietly replies, "So you'll be awake when the sun come up in the morning."

Mystics, and others who experience being graced by the Sacred, keep that grace alive by doing their practices, especially those that have them identifying with and carrying for those Jesus called "the least of these."

I would remind you that this identifying with and loving begins as an inside job. We have to deal with the divisions and dislikes that tyrannize us on the inside. Marianne Pettys sent me a great picture this week. It is a quote I'd never heard. "God said, 'Love your enemy.' I obeyed him and loved myself." - Kahil Gibran

Encounters with the Sacred leave us where division and fragmentation lose their tyranny over us. We are left, if we are lucky and awake, with a profound sense of oneness with all that is and all who are.

"I have thrown fire on the world. Look!"

You want to see like a mystic?

The way most of us are in our religious/spiritual practices, if we have them, is like this: We have a list of things we have to do or be or believe and with this in hand we go to the cave where we think God is and we do, are and believe these things in the hope that God will eventually come out of the cave and give us a hug. "Oh there, there. Aren't you cute. I love you so much. You're okay. You're in. Now run

along and have a nice life. By the way, if you ever get in trouble or need anything, give me a call.”

It's not that way at all. If we don't give up, and one of the things this teaching we are look at today is about patience, if we don't give up and walk away, we sit down and we calm our minds, we open our heart, our spiritual eyes and ears and we eventually hear God say, “I'm not coming out. I want you to come in here. By the way, don't bring your list.”

Jim Finley says that the Dark Night of the Soul begins like this. You know what a boat slip is at a marina, right? A boat slip is this dock, u-shaped, that you pull your boat into for safe keeping. You tie it on both sides.

Suppose you pull you boat into your slip - your boat is your life - and you settle down for a good night's sleep. During the night God comes to your slip very quietly so as not to wake you up. God unties one side of the boat. Then sneaks over to the other side and unties that side. Then God goes to the front of the boat and she gives it a shove out into the water. The next morning you wake up and look around and there is no land in sight and God giggles and says, “Gottcha. I've thrown fire on the earth.”

We don't like to venture far from shore when and if we do travel.

If we put aside what we think we know about Jesus, and approach him and his teachings as if for the first time something fearfully amazing happens. Jesus emerges as a teacher of the transformation of consciousness.

This transformation of consciousness leaves us where division and fragmentation lose their tyranny over us. We are left, if we are lucky and awake, with a profound sense of oneness with all that is and all who are.

Another mark of the mystic and mystical experience is beginning to live with a sense of joy and freedom and peace in the midst of life as it is.

And, one more thing, with a profound reverence for life that manifests itself in love.

I don't know when or where I first learned this, it was years ago: we know a mystic not by the way we feel about that person when we are in their presence but, rather, how we feel about ourselves.

Doesn't this sound wonderful? Peace and joy and unity and love and being able to be with what is and live without judgment? If you look at them carefully, however, you'll discover that mystics always pay a high price for who and what they are and what they have experienced and attempt to teach.

There are many metaphors used to reflect this journey. Jesus' struggle in the wilderness with Satan is one. His death on the cross is another.

St. John of the Cross kept referring the "the dark night of the soul."

Teresa of Avila was thought to be nuts as she talked about her journey from one mystical castle to another.

Jesus talked about a narrow way and a difficult path.

In this world onto which fire is thrown nothing less or contrary to love can live or thrive. Nonetheless, the ego is always trying to cut a deal to make it easy and/or simple.

We say to God. "If it is okay with you, I want my ego to become mystical and make the journey." God says, "No dice."

Jim Finley once asked Thomas Merton what he thought heaven would be like. Merton said, "Jim, I don't know. I do know there won't be much of you there."

You understand, this is metaphorical and non-dualistic language about heaven, right?

We hear this and our response is: "But it is me I most care about." And God says, "That's precisely your problem."

One of the great metaphors in both Hebrew and Christian mystical teaching about the journey from the ego into the heart of God is that of leaving home. Not only is leaving home difficult but also one leaves home and heads out for an unknown land, an unknown destination. Jesus had no idea what awaited him in the wilderness. Nor at the end of his life. Few of us rarely have the courage to say to the Sacred, “Not my will but yours.” Moving in that direction is never to be found in “group think,” the “majority vote,” or “the path of least resistance.”

The whole spiritual undertaking sounds awful doesn't it? So does living in the world created by the ego. There are some scary people out there and scary things. A client came to see me last week and began our time together by saying, “Have you heard about the school shooting in Pakistan? The Taliban entered a school and killed 141 people, 132 of them children?”

“I have thrown fire on the earth. Look! I'm gong to watch it, wait for it, nurture it, have faith in it until it blazes forth.”

There is disagreement among the scholars as to what this fire cast upon the earth is. Is it the teachings? I don't think so. Or, only in part. It is the people taught. It is the people who receive the teachings. The fire is you.

We are all called, whether we hear the teaching or not, to do our spiritual work. Which is what?

We are to surrender to the mystery, the Sacred Mystery, that has - at least unconsciously - accessed our hearts and wants to transform us into itself.

How is that going for you? Is it catching fire that you live in the heart of Sacred Mystery? Is it catching fire that this loving, evolving, creative power wants to find expression through who you are and how you live?

Yes, it is tough and scary and terrifying to the ego.

So, I'll end with the message that is at the heart of this season of the year. It is a message straight from God: “Fear not. I bring you tidings of great comfort and joy. I have thrown fire on the world. That fire is you. Look! I watch until it blazes.”

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.