

HEARTS ON FIRE

Lots of Christendom likes to pretend, at least at Christmastime, that we do not know anything about Christianity except for a baby in a manger. That takes a lot of pressure off. Babies are cute, and it's a touching story, and let's all be nice to each other – and maybe even generous too. But if that's it – if that's all there is – that may be enough for a holiday celebration, but that is not going to change anybody's life. Even a normal baby changes our lives more than that. Even a normal baby gets us up in the night, and starts us thinking about possibilities and necessities that are bigger than our own plans and problems.

Has your heart ever been on fire for God?

Here we are at the beginning of Advent. Christmas decorations are showing up all over the place. Lots of appeals are coming our way, from nearly endless directions. Most of them are about helping other people – which has to be a good thing, I suppose. But has your heart ever been on fire for God?

Do you actually believe that God would intervene enough in human affairs to send us a Messiah? Not *our* Messiah – not a human leader of our choosing. But *God's* Anointed One – a true and rightful King, whether we choose Him or not; whether we approve of Him or not; whether we like what He says and what He stands for ... or not. Does that not beggar the imagination?

Whether or not your heart or my heart has ever been on fire for God, we do know that down through the centuries there have been many other human beings whose hearts have been ablaze with the experiences and opportunities that have opened up for them because of their encounters with God. Moses, Muhammad, Jeremiah, Siddhartha, Isaiah, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther, Anne Hutchinson. I am not trying to complete the list; just trying to get it started in your head. Beyond the hundreds of famous names, most of you have friends and close relatives that belong on your own list. My point is: This is not our imagination. This is not some weird, otherworldly phenomenon. God is very real and exceedingly important to thousands of human beings down through the ages. Whether or not *your* heart has ever been on fire for God, lots of people you know about, both living and dead, have discovered that God is the most important reality they have ever encountered.

Many are claiming that we live in a secular culture, and that religion is for the gullible and the frightened. But they seem to me to be the gullible ones. For many generations we have watched the religious ones in our midst rise above their fears and live lives of amazing purpose and focus despite everything the world could do to make them conform and stop pretending spiritual awareness or spiritual priorities. Do we remember such things at Christmastime? As Advent unfolds again – as we contemplate the birth of the Messiah and what it means for our own time and in our own situations – do we open our own lives to such expectations? Are your hearts on fire for God?

“Unto us a child is born” – who will change life as we see it and expect it to be ... forever. Are we still living in the “old” notions about what life is about and what life is for and how *big* LIFE really is?

A tiny hint – so tiny most people miss it. Jesus is nearing the end of His time on earth. (Luke 21:5-19) He is trying to prepare His followers for what is to come – and no, it is not any kind of “Second Coming.”

“Some people were talking about the temple and the beauty of its fine stones and ornaments. Jesus said, ‘These things you are gazing at – the time will come when not one stone will be left upon another; they will all be thrown down.’ [I repeat, this is not about a Second Coming. The temple was indeed thrown down in 70 A.D. Do the math. That is one thousand nine hundred and forty-seven years ago.] *‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘when will that be? What will be the sign that these things are about to happen?’*

Jesus said, ‘Take care that you are not misled. For many will come claiming my name and saying “I am he” and “The time has come.” Do not follow them. And when you hear of wars and insurrections, do not panic. These things are bound to happen first; but the end does not follow at once.’ Then he added, ‘Nation will go to war against nation, kingdom against kingdom; there will be severe earthquakes, famines and plagues in many places, and in the sky terrors and great portents.

‘But before all this happens they will seize you and persecute you. You will be handed over to synagogues and put in prison; you will be haled before kings and governors for your allegiance to me. This will be your opportunity to testify. So resolve not to prepare your defense beforehand, because I myself will give you such words and wisdom

as no opponent can resist or refute. Even your parents and brothers, your relations and friends, will betray you. Some of you will be put to death; and everyone will hate you for your allegiance to me. But not a hair of your head will be lost. [What? They are going to hate you, persecute you, kill you – but not a hair of your head will be lost?] By standing firm you will win yourselves life.’”

Never mind the obvious intrigue of the details of the rest of this passage. Never mind the obvious assumptions that there is a plot and purpose to our lives far beyond the cars we drive, the jobs we hold, the prestige we have or do not have in the world around us. Jesus promises that some of us will be persecuted, betrayed, even put to death because of our allegiance to Him. But in the very same passage, He also promises that *“not a hair of your head will be lost.”*

Obviously He is not seeing life in the ways we see life most of the time. There are dimensions beyond the “time and death” that we consider to be our reality. And where will He be when He gives us the words and the wisdom we need against our opponents? He cannot be in Heaven, because we are still struggling here on earth. How startling is that! Jesus already knows that He will be back with us as Holy Spirit, but He has not yet been crucified or resurrected. Clearly some of our assumptions and explanations about what Jesus knows and when He knows it are far off the mark.

Jesus’ own best and most-willing followers could not grasp the dynamism of the New Covenant because they were so entrenched in the assumptions and expectations they already had – the ones they already carried with them. That is always our problem with Jesus. We will all have that problem with Jesus again this Advent. He is too new for us. And we are still locked-in, in so many ways, to our old ways of seeing and believing.

Life is bigger than we think. God is greater than we realize. Jesus is more in tune with God and more in contact with God than we have ever imagined, no matter how well we have imagined it.

How sad it is if Christmas is coming around again and we do not see the faintest glimmers of how big it is or what it is really about. If our hearts are not on fire, we have missed most of the dimensions of most of it. Look around you. Are you sitting in the midst of a people whose hearts are on fire? Well, maybe more than we realize.

It got me to thinking about some of the things we know that do set human hearts on fire (so to speak). There are some negative things, to be sure. Some of us are able to hold grudges, anger, or a conviction about injustice for long periods of time. Some people even seem to define their lives by things or people they are fighting against. Who knows, maybe some good comes from that. Some people are “for” community, harmony, brothers and sisters dwelling together in peace. Some people are “against” racism, intolerance, the marginalization of various groups among us. Is it possible to be against intolerance without becoming intolerant?

In any case, whether injustice sets our hearts on fire or merely burns with a determination to see some wrong things righted, negative motives can get all mixed up with righteous causes in our kind of world. Jesus told us, “*Do not resist one who is evil.*” And He seemed to have had little to do with Caiaphas, King Herod, Pilate, and numerous Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees. It looks to most of us that *His* heart was on fire for God and not against evil. Is that a mandate for His followers? We all wrestle with such things from time to time.

But back to our question: What are some of the things that we know set human hearts on fire? We look around us and know that not everybody we meet is ablaze with some passion or purpose. But a closer look reveals that many people really are. Some of us have a fierce love for our mate and for our children. Some of us are very passionate about our work. Many of us can remember the change that came over us – the exhilaration that came – in the realization that somebody loved us. Before there were any freeways to help, it was a long and arduous drive from Long Beach to Altadena. Yet I still clearly remember how eagerly I would make that trip, anticipating all the way how good it would be to see Mariana again. Her parents would do what they could to ruin the visit, but what are a few obstacles to those who are in love?

Do our hearts not go on fire when we discover that God, the Almighty, loves us? It may sound crazy to those who have no such experience, but the phenomenon has been going on all around us for at least the last four thousand years. We do not have to make anything up; we do not have to pretend anything or exaggerate anything. Good records do not go back much further, but God was somehow in contact with Abraham and Jacob and Joseph and Moses. And it has not become more obscure – it has become more *obvious* the closer we get to our own time. God is a huge fire in the lives of countless thousands

of people in our own time. We may not always like or approve of the results, but then nothing is finished or completed here.

In any case, if we really do expect and want to celebrate the coming of God's Messiah and not just as something that happened once, a long time ago, then history is on our side. God really *does* have business with us; agenda to talk over with us; purposes to discuss with us; new dimensions to introduce into our lives, if we are willing to listen and cooperate. Whenever we realize that we have in some fashion encountered God, it sets our hearts on fire. A burning bush; a catch of fish; a light on a Damascus Road; a question about indulgences; a healing we did not expect – we never know when some ordinary circumstance will suddenly transform into encounter we did not think was possible, and into light we did not know was burning all around us.

Some of us wonder if we are half crazy to be expecting anything different or wondrous this time around. Advent and Christmas are just cultural customs – things we do every year because they are things we do every year. And to be sure, if you have everything you need or think you need, then most certainly your heart is not on fire. A heart content with things the way they are is not on fire.

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Some people keep trying to start a fire under their own souls, hoping they can shake themselves loose to something more than they have known so far. Then they wonder why the fire they start keeps going out.

Advent is a time to wait and watch. But if we understand what has been going on for lo these many years, then we have every reason to be expectant. God never comes the way we expect it to happen, but we can still *be* expectant. God comes to everyone who is truly willing and waiting. What? God comes to *everyone* who is truly willing and waiting. It is not our idea; we did not create ourselves. Yet clearly God has agenda with all of the children who are open to it – with all of those who have cleared enough room in their lives to let God in. It is not something I would ever claim or proclaim by my own understanding. It is Jesus who told us: “*Seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*”

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Of course Jesus means more than my poor words can convey. His mission here on earth is greater than any of us fully comprehend even yet. But all of us know more about His story than we sometimes let on. That's good news. It sets our hearts on fire. It is Advent. And God is after us – oh yes, in love and in mercy, but it is still likely to be quite a jolt.

We think we have made room for Him, but He wants more. We think we are full of gratitude, but we have it cut back to what seems reasonable and safe. We think we already love Him, but that is easily overwhelmed by the sudden realization of how much God *truly* loves us.

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I suppose if I really loved you like you would wish and appreciate, I would hope and pray for an ordinary Advent and Christmas for you. A nice, safe, down-to-earth time of pleasant meals and gentle conversations, a time full of pretty decorations and lovely music, a time of tranquility and contentment.

But that's not what my prayers and hopes for you are like. I hope and pray for the real thing: the coming of the Holy Spirit of God's true Messiah. I know that when Jesus really comes to us, it sets our hearts on fire.