

Fire by Anna Gilcher



PROPHETIC HOPE

Angel and Prophet

Alek Rapoport

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Center for The Arts and Religion,*

Wesley Theological Seminary

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Fire! Baptism! What stress I am under! Not peace, but division! I get the sense as I read the passage that he's really excited about what's going on—he's really passionate about it—"on fire" with his message.

In today's gospel, we get to hear Jesus speaking to his closest friends about what he's experiencing, what he's noticing.

Fully engaged, alive, every one of his senses alert, his blood pumping through his veins. He's noticed already that his message is bringing divisions and that seems to be the cost of truth, the cost of good news. Because not everyone is happy to hear it. Not everyone is willing to have their dinner interrupted with, in Barbara Brown Taylor's unforgettable image, the sword of the gospel landing on the table, with one half of the roast beef on each side, green beans flying

everywhere.⁽¹⁾ Some are thrilled to their very bones and burst forth to tell everyone about it, wanting to follow Jesus wherever he goes; others just want to clean up the mess and get on with dinner for goodness sake (and did you ask to be excused, young lady?); while still others don't believe anything's happened at all—they're still chewing on their meat and don't understand why everyone in the family's gone crazy. What sword? What fire? Everything looks the same to me.

Can you feel it?

Can you feel the warmth, can you see the light, smell the smoke, hear the crackle?

Can you sense the danger? and the hope that it brings?

Fire—to purify, to enlighten, to warm, to enliven.

Fire—which can flatten entire forests, entire cities.

I'm reminded of Lucy asking about Aslan, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: but is he quite safe?

I have not come to bring peace, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

No, he is not safe. . . . But he is good.

He is real. He is a force of nature, of truth, of authentic relationship. Willing to risk disapproval, to disappoint; willing to be intimate with his friends, willing to be stripped naked and tortured to death for all to see. Willing to be disappointed and vulnerable.

He is not safe, not un-dangerous (2) and he himself is not safe—safe from danger—either. And somehow that's how he creates a truer and deeper safety, for himself and for us, beyond the safety of the dinner table, the perfectly climate-controlled air-conditioned dining room with the chair rail and just the right wallpaper, the perimeter guard of the house alarm on, the doors locked. A new family is created, one that is not limited by bloodlines, or households guarded by alarms. A family that includes anyone who can feel the fire and is willing to go toward it to warm themselves. A family that includes those who didn't have dinner tonight, and have no family to go to—and who suddenly find themselves surrounded by folks who call them brother, sister, aunt, uncle. A new belonging, granted to anyone whose feet walk this earth and not contingent on anything other than willingness to see what's in front of them. The fire. The sword. The promise.

Deborah preached about the Trinity in her sermon two weeks ago, and somehow I sense that the image of God as always in-relationship in God's very self, in God's three-in-one-ness is important as we look at the fire, at what Jesus is calling us to. For while when I say "the Trinity" it can seem like an ancient, dry theological concept, having nothing much to do with fiery passion that Jesus is clearly embodying, Deborah lovingly brought it to life two weeks ago in the image of the eternal dance among the three persons of God. Ever-changing, ever-present.

Let me read you the last full paragraph of her sermon: I believe that there is prophetic hope for our lives, both individually and in community, in knowing God as triune being, as the Holy One, the Holy Three, undivided yet distinct. When my children were young, and I was not yet a Christian, they would sometimes ask me about God. In those days, without a community to help me, sometimes I would say that God is the force that holds everything in the universe together. Other times, I would say, simply, that God is love. Today, it seems to me that both answers mean the same thing. The love of God is not some weak, sentimental feeling. Rather, it is the essential energy that flows between and among the three Persons of God, and expands outwards to contain all of creation. Despite failing bridges, interminable wars, and the violence, greed, and corruption that seems to be everywhere we look, I believe that God's model of community, of relationship, of love continues to bind us to one another, guiding us to a better way.

Jesus tells us that five in a household will be divided three against two and two against three as he brings fire upon the earth. (3)

Does the Trinity show us that in some deeper way, there never is division, that there is always a deeper truth of harmony, that three dance together and include everything and everyone, that the giving of self and the deep receiving of the other is the true joy and order of the universe?

N.T. Wright agrees that the trinity is a truly life-filled and life-affirming concept: "The Trinity does not begin with

abstract thought, though it will stretch the minds of anyone who reflects on it. It begins with passion: the passion of Jesus, the passion of the apostles, the passion for reconciliation, God's passion for the world. It is not, to begin with, a thinking person's doctrine. It is a passionate person's doctrine."

A passionate person's doctrine.

Turning to the crowds, Jesus says, you hypocrites, you know how to read the business section of the newspaper, you know when to invest your money and when to sell your stock, you have financial advisors and health advisors looking over the health of your portfolios and measuring your heartbeatx but you don't know how to analyze the times we are in! You don't notice that the very air you breathe is polluted! or that the very words you say, the way you look at the world is upside down and inside out! You read the labels on the food in the grocery store, but most of what's in that store isn't even fit to eat. How much of this food really feeds you? How much of this attention to finances and health is opening your heart and creating new life? Ditch the grocery stores! Stop reading the newspaper! Change the way you're thinking! Get real! Start living your life! (4)

Mary Oliver asks: Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

And from Eugene Peterson's translation in The Message: Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront!

What do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Jesus is truly passionate in this passage. On fire about bringing fire to the earth. Rumi wrote: "If your knowledge of fire has been turned to certainty by words alone, then seek to be cooked by the fire itself. Don't abide in borrowed certainty. There is no real certainty until you burn; if you wish for this, sit down in the fire."

Where is the fire for you, right now in your life?

Where is the fire for us, in our life as a community?

Are we willing to sit down in the fire, so we can know what fire really is?

Can we trust in the wholeness of the Trinity while we are burning?

Footnotes:

(1) "Family Values" in *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1995), p. 15.

(2) From a sermon at the Eucharist on Trinity Sunday, 2002, Westminster Abbey.

(3) "The Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

(4) Mevlana Rumi, *Rumi: Daylight (A Daybook of Spiritual Guidance)*, trans. Camille and Kabir Helminsky (Boston: Shambala, 1999).