SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — December 7, 2025

How do you prepare for events that are so new to you that it makes it difficult to be fully prepared?

Example: having your first baby. Can you be fully prepared for how much a newborn needs you for every need?

Advent includes remembrance of that kind of preparation. Mary and Joseph are getting ready for their first child — under conditions of severe poverty and imperial oppression

But Advent includes a preparation far more challenging than that: How does one prepare for something that's never happened before in human history?

That's what John the Baptist has been tasked with doing when 'preparing the way of the Lord': he is preparing for something that has never before happened in human history. How does one do that?

John had some problems completing his mission of preparation. It didn't all go smoothly. He knows the one who comes after him will be quite different. He baptizes with water. The one he's preparing for will baptize with the spirit and fire. But does he understand that difference? His reference to fire sounds like conventional judgment: the wheat, the good stuff, is gathered into the barn; and the chaff, the bad stuff, will be burned with unquenchable fire. I submit to you, that because he is preparing for something, someone, who has never appeared before in human history, he cannot really understand — not until it all takes place.

Two thousand years later, I'm not sure we quite understand still. Many Christians hear the words of John the Baptist about judgment and assume it *is* what Jesus came to bring. Jesus is merely the fulcrum of the judgment: Believe in Jesus and you will be gathered into the 'barn' of heaven. Fail to believe in Jesus and you will suffer the unquenchable fire of hell. I submit to you that those kinds of views of God's judgment couldn't be further from the truth. They miss the history-changing nature of the One for whom John came to prepare the way.

For forty years I've been tasked with preaching on these words, and I've struggled to understand what they mean. Spirit and fire? What does it mean to baptize with Spirit and fire? This week I finally heard something that makes complete sense to me: "Spirit and Fire" mean 'Wisdom and Apocalypse':

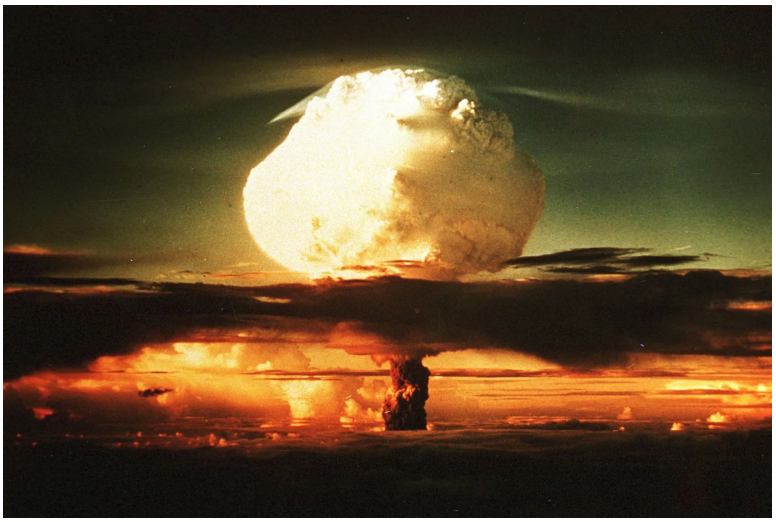
Spirit = Wisdom = God teaching us the right way to be human.

Fire = Apocalypse = the *revelation of human violence* as violence (that is, *not* as *God's* violence!), and that we can never end our violence unless we choose to suffer it rather than return it. The latter is our age-old failed way of being human.

Together, in Jesus Christ, Spirit and Fire mean that God came to teach us how to live in peace without any violence — or, when violence arises, by choosing to suffer the violence rather than return it. *This* is what had never been taught as the way of being human. We believe so firmly in needing violence to stop the violence, that we never could have prepared for its appearance in human history. Two thousand years later, we're still struggling to understand.

There is a verse in Matthew's Gospel (and Matthew's alone) which I believe makes this all crystal clear — *if* you clear up the translation probably, that is. Here, for example, are two modern translations of this verse:

- Matt 11:12, NIV: Jesus says, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.”
- Matt 11:12, NRSVue: Jesus says, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence,* and violent people take it by force.” (*or *has been coming violently*)
- Do you see the problem? The translation we use (NRSVue) even footnotes the option: either the kingdom of heaven, God’s reign, has been coming violently, or has been suffering violence. The opposite!
- Why such confusion? Because the verb for violence is in the middle voice, somewhere between active (“coming violently”) and passive (“suffering violence”). Which is it?
- My proposal: read in the context of Matthew’s Gospel of Jesus — where Jesus teaches us to ‘turn the other cheek’ to violence and ‘love our enemies,’ and then shows us what this is like on the cross — the *middle voice* means we are to *choose* to suffer violence rather than return it. Choosing that course of action is the active part, and suffering violence is the passive part.



Let me end by considering the opposite of God’s reign in the world, a revelation of our human violence which is also one of those rare events which happened for the first time in human history only 80 years ago: the explosion of the first atomic bomb. How do you prepare for that? The designers of the bomb where even worried that it might cause a chain reaction in the atmosphere and end up incinerating the entire world. It didn’t, but it was still history changing. Robert Oppenheimer, the person in charge of the project is said to have quoted Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, as he witnessed the first blast: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” He later explained that he remembered this line from the *Bhagavad Gita* as he watched the explosion, a sentiment shared by many present who felt history had irrevocably changed.

Siblings in Christ, during the Advent season we prepare for the opposite kind of history-changing event: the coming of the One who says, “Now I am become Life, the healer of worlds.” He came to teach us the Wisdom, in the Holy Spirit, of God’s reign, where the only way to ultimately end the human love-affair with violence is to choose to suffer the violence and never return it.

We have evidence that in the first several centuries of the Christian movement, disciples of Jesus understood this. Thousands of early Christians chose to suffer the violence of empire rather than return it. But when the Emperor Constantine made the brilliant choice of making Christianity into the imperial religion, “Christendom” was born, a movement that largely renewed the human love-affair with violence. We once again became like John the Baptist, not really understanding the history-changing core of Jesus’ Wisdom. We again began choosing the Fire instead of the Spirit.

By God’s good grace, just as we invented a world destroying weapon, God sent a Hindu man, Mahatma Gandhi, who quoted Jesus and showed us once again the Wisdom of God’s reign. In the face of so much death in our world, let us prepare for the Advent *into our lives* of the One who brings Life. Let us become healers of our world on fire. Amen