

Don't let God's word bypass you (Luke 3:1-6)

John is set ablaze. What about all the other characters in the Gospels?

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"I will not die an unlived life," writes Dawna Markova,

I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.

To live is to catch fire. This strange man named John has taken up residence in an even stranger, sinister place. He has chosen not to live in fear. He is open to God and to God's word, a word Jeremiah compares to a burning fire shut up in his bones. John is combustible. The spark of the Spirit sets him ablaze.

I am intrigued by the people whom God's word bypasses in the Gospels. Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas are not recipients of God's word. Those who preach and teach must ask why.

Are these men fire resistant? Are they self-extinguishing and immune to being impacted by divine fire? Are they fire retardant? Has some existential reality inoculated them from flammability? Why aren't they, like John, human conflagrations?

These men have one thing in common: power. They luxuriate in imperial, provincial, local, and ecclesial power. And God's word does not rest upon them. Even Annas and

Caiaphas, whose sphere is theological and cultic, are not portrayed here as privy to the flame of God's word. Luke seems to suggest that God's word has a hermeneutic of suspicion relative to power. Christians should be skeptical of power and those who seek it, ecclesial power notwithstanding.

The moment in which we preach is preoccupied with power. The midterm elections are over. Partisan rancor is paralyzing governing's possibilities. Churches are embroiled in scandal. We seem consumed with the accumulation of power and the melodramatic lives of those whom power has destroyed.

As we watch those grabbing headlines and political and commercial victories, God's word keeps marching into the wilderness and choosing John. The church should fear being bypassed by God's word above all else. Preachers should fear being bypassed by God's word above all else.

This Advent and always, the church has to risk its perceived power and significance so that the seed of God's word will blossom and bear fruit. Mercifully, we pray for God's word not to bypass us, but to rest upon us. In the words of Isaac Watts:

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove.
With all thy quickening powers,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
In these cold hearts of ours.