

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - December 1, 2019 - Plowing Ahead
Matthew 24:36-44 Isaiah 2:1-5**

Intense, prolonged heat is a powerful force, with the ability to kill bacteria in our food, transform water into steam, and reduce wood to ash. The Bible speaks of a refining fire, a heat that can melt solid metals so effectively that those materials can be shaped and molded in new ways. Under the right conditions, even blemishes and impurities can be removed.

Have you ever had the privilege of watching a metal smith at work? Guiding an object into the center of the fire until the end glows with a brilliant, orange hue. Next, the smith takes a second piece of metal, this one at room temperature. The smith uses it like a hammer, slamming it into the first. The hot, glowing orb makes a tremendous clank as sparks dance in every direction, signaling that something new is on the way.

In the Bible, the image of a refining fire is a reminder that we, too, are in need of reformation. When John the Baptist arrives with a warning to repent, his message feels far too abrupt, and much too self-righteous. For most of us, his words are received more like a jagged little pill than a mug of cider on an evening such as this.

And while most of us would prefer to keep our blemishes hidden, God often leads us to come face to face with them, instead. Just consider the example of Mickey Mantle, who retired from Major League Baseball in 1969 at the age of 33. Mantle, widely considered the best home run switch hitter ever, “enjoyed the glory years of the Yankees through their repeated World Series appearances.”¹

“But regret, not glory, marked the downward spiral of his personal life.” Mantle struggled mightily with alcohol in the 1980s, “losing much of his purpose and meaning in life and describing it to friends as his own internal hell. When he finally entered Baylor Medical Center for a liver transplant in June 1995, doctors gave him just days to live if he didn’t have the transplant.”²

Then, “a few weeks after surgery,” the baseball legend “walked into a standing-room-only press conference at the hospital. It would prove to be his last public statement. Sadness and regret marked his words as he described the life he had squandered: ‘God gave me a great body and an ability to play baseball,’ he said. ‘God gave me everything, and I just...pfffft!... I’d like to say to the kids out there, if you’re looking for a role model, this is a role model: don’t be like me.’”³

¹ Peter W. Marty, “Holiness,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2019, Pg. 6.

² Marty, pg. 6.

³ Marty, pg. 6.

“When a reporter asked Mantle if he had signed a donor card, he said, ‘Everything I’ve got is worn out... Although I’ve heard people say they’d like to have my heart, it’s never been used.’ At the same press conference he spoke of his selfishness: ‘I want to start giving back,’ he told those gathered, ‘[because] all I’ve ever done is take.’” As it would turn out, Mickey Mantle would never have the opportunity to seize on that hope of giving back. “Four weeks after speaking to the press,” he “was dead from anemia and an infection.”⁴

None of us wants to face the intense heat of a refining fire. To be reminded of our poor choices. Our wrong turns. Our lost opportunities. And yet, no matter who we are, Advent reminds us of who we are called to be.

You may recall that just last year, Sony released a biopic starring Tom Hanks as Fred Rogers. For thirty years, Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, told others “you are loved just the way you are.” Each day, he entertained children while teaching them the values of our faith. He referred to “the space between the viewer and the TV set as ‘holy ground,’” recognized “the potential in every human

⁴ Marty, pg. 6.

encounter for something holy to happen,” and credited those inspired moments “as the work of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

Fred Rogers trusted that “if he was offering his television show in good faith, then whatever shortcomings he had, the Holy Spirit would do the work necessary so that people could receive the grace they needed.” And yet, his last words before his death in 2003 may surprise you. Turning to his wife and revealing the depth of his own, human vulnerability, Rogers asked, “Am I a sheep?” There, in his final moments, the minister, the teacher, the celebrated television personality was recalling a familiar image of Jesus’ disciples, and he was searching for reassurance and comfort regarding the life that he had lived.⁶

Our second lesson this morning comes to us from Isaiah’s prophecy where we hear these words: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” Isaiah’s is the image of a refining fire. Of the kind of personal and corporate transformation that is possible when God intercedes in our midst. During Advent, Jesus is made known, not in the commanding voice of a general, but in the

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/23/entertainment/mister-rogers-faith-religion/index.html>. Accessed on November 31, 2019.

⁶ Rogers.

gentle cries of an infant. In Advent, we celebrate the one we call the Prince of Peace.

But what does peace look like?

I recognize that we live in a deeply divided country where it is rarely popular to lift up the pronouncements of any one politician. Yet, whatever your opinion of elected leaders or the parties that they represent, I find it helpful to acknowledge and affirm the truth wherever it is found.

In Advent of 2018, former President George W. Bush offered a eulogy at his father's funeral, a U.S. President himself, and remembered something his father said to him at his inauguration:

We cannot hope to leave our children only a bigger car, a bigger bank account. We must give them a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home and neighborhood and town better than he found it. What do we want the men and women who work with us to say when we are no longer there? That we were more driven to succeed than anyone around us? Or that we stopped to ask if a sick child had gotten better and stayed a moment to trade a word of friendship.⁷

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/us/politics/george-hw-bush-funeral.html>. Accessed on November 31, 2019.

Friends, on this first Sunday of Advent, we remember that God is always reforming and refining us, making us ready for the work to come. Our swords are heated and refashioned in the image of plowshares in order that we might give life instead of taking it. For under the right conditions, even our blemishes and impurities can be removed.

With Advent longing and hope, may all thanks be to God. Amen.