

Dry, brittle, crackling are the chaff, the weeds, the prickly brambles. Heaped deep in piles, the winds blow them helter-skelter over drought-dry lands. They fill the streets and cover house roofs. Suddenly, a fiery tongue of orange-red flame flashes through the strewn residue and ignites a torrent of incendiary fury. Like a huge blast furnace, intense heat consumes all around, gulping up the fuel. Hours, days, weeks later, the charred remains flake apart. Heat pots continue to smoke and smolder. Everything wrecks of sooty black carbon and ashes.

Dry, scorching heat. . .consuming flames. We who live through the summer months in the Okanagan face the ongoing threat of fire. Nevertheless this *winter* we are stunned to watch drought-stricken Los Angeles burn under flames driven by Santa Ana winds of hurricane force. Wild fire deserves greatest respect. It brings with it fear, destruction, and death.

The fires of condemnation and hell which our Lord Jesus warns about often in His teaching point to the reality of God's wrath and judgment that is justly poured out in punishment of sin. His Word shows that even the slightest fault is equal to the greatest sin against God. No person is without sin. Nor can anyone buy insurance or fight the eternal fires of judgment by any work or doing of good efforts or cunning to fight this fire off! There is nothing of value to barter with God. What can a man give in exchange for his soul? Even the opera legends of Faust, who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for some years of success, wealth, and pleasure, actually have it all wrong. It is given to a man once to die, and then the judgment--and that is before God. The Bible describes the lake of fire as the place prepared for Satan and the evil angels. It is not the devil's to manage. It is God Himself, our Creator, with whom we must deal. As it is written in Hebrews, "**our God is a consuming fire.**" (ch.12,29). Are we ready now to face our Maker? God is perfect. His Law and Commandments are perfect. Yet, when the Law begins to do its true work, it causes us grief and heaps on us guilt, for in it we see the reflection of who we are. The Law shows our sin. And sin pays its wage: death.

So when God's same Holy Word points to His Will to quench the consuming flames, and calls us to "**Fear not, for I have redeemed you, you are Mine,**" it is His purpose to draw us into His arms, forgiven, to protect us from evil, and rescue us from the destruction we face if we are left to face His wrath without Him!

Baptized, washed clean! You see, Jesus fulfills the Law of God, and grants to us, by faith in Him, the deliverance *He* has accomplished. Renew your knowledge about God's promises to you in your baptism. By it God claims you in grace. You can place your eternal life upon it!

Do you have the treasure of God-given faith, the treasure of Christ Jesus, alive in you?

Perhaps you are living through some doldrum days. Do you stumble up against accusations that your efforts aren't good enough? That you're at fault?

Dry, empty, are the efforts and works that proceed apart from faith.

They fall into the category of self-proving; of self-satisfaction, of feeling I'm good enough that I don't need God's ways to interfere with my life. I'm basically okay just on my own.

That was the context of the words that prophet Isaiah proclaimed in today's Old Testament lesson. The verses before describe Israel's Failure to Hear and See. God's people were blind and deaf, though God sought them and called to them. Oh, they heard! But they refused His Word and went their own way instead. They lived in defiance to God's call to honour Him alone

as their Lord. They chased other belief systems and religions. "It's all the same," they said. Their hearts forsook their God. They said, "We can do what we determine we feel is best for ourselves." "We like to party and chase what gives us thrill, passion and pleasure--after all, it's okay as long as we don't hurt anybody." They were not lights shining the Light of their God to the world. They were thieves and adulterers, robbers who held to false treasures while God's Word directed their hearts belonged first in worship of Him, the true God. But they stubbornly held on to these things instead. They chose to follow their other whims and wishes. They treated created things as their gods, which are not gods at all.

For this, the Lord God brought on them captivity, to be looted and plundered by the foreign, godless peoples they sought to be like. Isaiah 42:24-25 reads:

**²⁴Who gave up Jacob to the looter,
and Israel to the plunderers?
Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned,
in whose ways they would not walk,
and whose law they would not obey?
²⁵So He poured on him the heat of His anger
and the might of battle;
it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;
it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.**

What a picture! How God describes His stumbling, wayward people. For this He has banned them into exile, into prison, into disgrace. So God was at work to humble them, to bring them to repentance, that they would turn from their stubbornness back to Him, their almighty Lord.

Now hear again today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah 43:1-7:

**¹But now thus says the LORD,
He who created you, O Jacob,
He who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are Mine.**

²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

(So did Noah and family pass through the flood in the Ark. So did God's people at the Exodus pass through the Red Sea. So also is this a sign of Holy Baptism, by which we are saved.)

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

(So did the people cross the Jordan river as they entered the promised land led by Joshua. The Lord of Hosts went before them to give them the land. (Joshua 3))

**when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.**

(So did it happen for Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego during the times of exile under Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. When they did not bow to his statue, he had them thrown into a fiery furnace. Then there appeared with them a fourth Person, one like a son of the gods. In fact, it was the pre-incarnate Christ there with them. They lived! In fact, there was not even the smell of smoke on their clothing or in their hair. (Daniel 3))

**³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. . . .**

**⁴Because you are precious in My eyes,
and honoured, and I love you, . . .**

**⁵Fear not, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east. . . west, north, and south. . . no one will be left out
⁷everyone who is called by My Name,
whom I created for My glory,
whom I formed and made."**

Has God made you? Touch your chest, feel your heart beating. Yes, He has!

Has God saved you? Listen to His Word of the Gospel. Christ Jesus died on the cross to bear your sin, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Yes, He has saved you!

Has God claimed you to be His own child, to inherit His kingdom forever?

Recall the truths of His promises to you! Have you been baptized into Christ? Make the sign of the cross--it's a way to remember your Baptism. So you have been clothed in Christ! *and by Christ!* See Holy Baptism for what it is! Your *God-given* faith in Jesus Christ is *your supreme treasure!* For *His life's sake* you are forgiven. Baptism's gift of faith results in spiritual life now, and eternal life to come. Holy Baptism drowns the Old Adam in you, rids the condition of spiritual death in disbelief now, and saves you from the eternal punishment of fire and destruction that God will pour out in His just wrath against all sin at the Final Judgment on the Last Day. No other gift gives you this most essential, soul-saving blessing!

Are others coming to know there is a loving God through us? What is Christian about your life and mine? Is there evidence to convict you as a follower of Jesus Christ? How about us as Redeemer Lutheran congregation? What evidence of Christ's love can we recognize and affirm and share next with each other, and together, in our community?

Reflection on God's calling, and prayer to Him for His good and gracious will to be done among us -- these are a few of the marks of His Holy Spirit at work among us. Others include that the peace of Christ is shared among us. . .and we're talking about and living out His kind of peace that is centered in the forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation of offenses among us in love and peace. The marks of His Spirit include thirst for His Word, which quenches our spiritual thirst. We delight to hear His Word regularly. He moves us to put it into practice.

Quenching the Consuming Flames! That's the power of Baptism our Lord Jesus Christ has instituted for His Church. Sin, Satan, Death--all are driven away by Christ. The inheritance we receive is life through sins forgiven completely in Jesus' blood shed on the cross. It includes Satan's defeat--He can harm us none. He's judged, the Deed is done. The Word in the Flesh--Jesus Christ--defeated Satan's deceiving power. He cannot overpower the treasure of our God-given faith now. Satan will be completely cut off from our eternal future with Christ! And death? It's sting is gone. Death now serves Christ, to be the gate to what lies ahead. For as Christ rose from the dead, so also will we. This is God's inheritance for us through the gift of faith--all this is in our Baptism according to Christ's Word.

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Christ Jesus, our Lord!