“Pyro-Theology for a World on Fire, Or, Songs of Hope to Put Out the Flames”
Advent 2B (December 10, 2017)
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>>Give us, O God, a new song to sing with lyrics that will burn with hope. And begin with us today. Amen.<<

John Henning Schumann said to a friend recently that he felt stressed about everything that’s been happening in the world. Schumann’s friend offered some advice. She told him to “Go for a float!” “A float?,” he asked. “Yes,” she said, “spend an hour in a dark, soundproof room floating in a body-temperature warm pool. ‘The heavy salt concentration does the work for you … you just lie there and meditate,’ [she told him.]” Schumann was intrigued; so he did a little research. In a story for NPR, he reports, “I visited the lab of neuropsychologist Justin Feinstein at the Laureate Institute for Brain Research in Tulsa, Okla.” “Feinstein is investigating float therapy as a … treatment for people with conditions like anxiety and depression. … Before volunteers get in the pool, Feinstein maps their brains using functional MRI … [He] takes images again after a 60-minute float. And he’s finding that floating seems to quiet activity in the amygdala, the brain’s center of fear and anxiety. Feinstein asked if I wanted to try it,” said Schumann, “so after a quick shower, I jumped right in. The round pool is 1 foot deep, 8 feet in diameter, and saturated with 1,332 pounds of magnesium sulfate, commonly known as Epsom salt. It holds you up like a mattress. The room is soundproof, the lights are off and you just lay back and float. Floating made me feel weightless; it’s kind of like being suspended in air. I could feel my muscles relaxing. … It took a while to let my thoughts quiet down, but eventually I was so relaxed I fell asleep—while floating! … One of Feinstein’s pilot studies, … found that in 50 individuals with anxiety, all showed measurable signs of relaxation including lowered blood pressure, lowered activity in the brain, and significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety. …” “More and more commercial float centers are opening across the country,” says Schumann, “including the H2Oasis Float Center and Tea House … in Tulsa … It uses the same open pools that were designed for Feinstein’s lab …”. The owner of the clinic calls it “one of the most relaxing hours of your life.” “Injured athletes, veterans with PTSD, people with chronic pain and anxiety,” all come for treatment. ‘I have people leaving the pools crying,’” says the owner, “‘because they never knew they could feel that good because they have so much pain on a daily basis, whether it’s physical pain or mental pain’ …” Schumann concludes that while medication is still the preferred treatment for anxiety, maybe we can also try “to float some of [our] stress away.”

…After watching or reading the news over the past few weeks, I suspect many of us might crave a dip in the Float Clinic’s healing waters. Just this week, ABC news posted a video of California’s wildfires burning alongside the 405 freeway. Flames were licking the shoulder of the road as drivers motored past. Hundreds of public schools in LA were closed; and classes at UCLA were canceled. In Ventura, the 101 freeway was closed, and, according to one report, residents “slept with one eye open,” wondering whether a wayward spark might force them to flee their homes. LA wasn’t the only place burning this week. On Wednesday,
it was announced that the U.S. embassy would be moved to Jerusalem, igniting religious passions as yet again the holy city—whose name means "City of Peace"—is inflamed in controversy. Philosopher Jacques Derrida once made a fiery comment that "The war over the "appropriation of Jerusalem" is today’s world war." The past few weeks and months have also seen brave women come forward to tell their "me too" stories that have been smoldering for years about the misconduct of high profile men. TIME magazine called these women "The Silence Breakers." And then we’ve witnessed a wildfire of activity in the halls of Congress as tax reform blazes toward becoming law, sparking a range of emotion and action, including prophetic action from Reverend William Barber’s Poor People’s Campaign. There’s been a lot of fire in the news lately. We might all want to "go for a float" to cope.

Today’s scripture readings are all filled with fire. The gospel reading from Mark introduces the incendiary prophet John the Baptist, who, we’re told, was clothed in scratchy camel’s hair, eating a nauseating diet of stuffed locusts dipped in honey. John was rough and odd; I imagine him looking at bit like Hagrid in Harry Potter: tangled beard, disheveled, the smell and aura of outdoors and wilderness clinging to him like the cloud of dust that hovers about the Peanuts character Pig-pen. But John had a tongue of fire, which Mark’s gospel tames. In the other New Testament gospels, John lashes out at religious elites, calling them a “brood of vipers”; he warns of fiery wrath to come, of axes hacking down trees that get cast into the flames; and he promises that the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John’s inflammatory words lay waste the undergrowth of injustice, clearing a path for the arrival of Jesus, whose own message and presence were both soothing water and stinging flame.

Our epistle reading for today from Second Peter also speaks of fire, apocalyptic fire that incinerates the heavens and the earth, and makes way for a new heaven and a new earth to emerge from the charred remains. Second Peter exhorts readers to welcome and even hasten this purgation, because he believes that only after torching everything can a new world be created from the carnage. It’s a pessimistic vision of the world—a vision that despairs of any other solution to the world’s problems than reducing everything to ash so that, like a Phoenix, something new can rise. The writer of Second Peter is living in a kind of hell. The setting is sometime in the late first century or early second century when the Roman authorities are just beginning to realize that there is a new, foreign thing called “Christianity” that is different from the thing called Judaism that they were familiar with. The Romans more or less accepted the Jews, because Romans liked classical things: classical philosophy from ancient Greece; classical religions and deities from antiquity. Judaism was old—classic—so the Romans accepted it. Christianity was new; so the Romans tried to stamp it out. There is an early second century series of letters between a Roman governor named Pliny and the Roman emperor Trajan. Pliny is alarmed that there are Christians in his jurisdiction. So, he writes to the emperor asking for advice. Awaiting a response, Pliny uses the tried and true Roman methods of stamping out dissent: torture and execution. For the next more than two hundred years after Pliny, various authorities in the empire would hunt Christians, sending them to the lions in the colosseum, to the rack, or to the cross. This is the writer of Second Peter’s world. Faced with an omnipotent state, the only solution seemed to be to burn it all and start over. It’s a text that puts into words the cries of the oppressed—the cries of the despairing—who desperately want to believe that something else is possible, a world beyond the current

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4 Quoted in Peter Slosserdijk, God’s Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 2.
political order, beyond the chaos of violence or economic hardship or personal catastrophe. The writer gazes out on the horizon of the world and sees its problems—its wildfires, its civil wars in places like Yemen, its backward politics in places of power, its battles over holy cities—and wills himself to believe that there is hope beyond all of this—he calls it a “new heavens and a new earth where justice will dwell.” The dream is pure and holy even if Second Peter’s tactics of burning everything to the ground to realize the dream seem a bit severe.

Second Peter’s dream is the same dream—the same hope—put into lyrics by the prophet Isaiah in today’s Old Testament reading. Today’s reading marks a shift in this sixty-six chapter book called “Isaiah”: a new author, a “Second Isaiah” as some have called him, begins to sing in ch. 40 with some of the most dazzling lyrics in all of scripture—lyrics most of us know from that great tenor piece in Handel’s Messiah. Whereas the first thirty-nine chapters of this book mostly warn of doom, Second Isaiah—perhaps in a great tenor voice of his own—sings of hope. To an exiled people, whose holy city of Jerusalem had been burned with fire by an invading army, Second Isaiah’s first line is “Comfort, comfort my people.” In his advice to writers titled Letters to a Young Writer, renowned novelist Colum McCann writes that “A first line should open up your rib cage. It should reach in and twist your heart backward. It should suggest that the world will never be the same again.” I think the first line “Comfort, comfort my people,” more than meets McCann’s challenge. Second Isaiah sings of speaking “tenderly to Jerusalem”—literally in Hebrew, “speaking to Jerusalem’s heart”—a hope-filled song that fire-ravaged Jerusalem’s wars would cease; its rough places would be paved smooth; its surrounding mountains and hills brought low; its valleys lifted up. Glad tidings—good news, a “gospel” as it’s called in the Greek version of this text—would be announced from the heights, and God would appear as a returning warrior at peace, and as a compassionate shepherd, gathering and nurturing her flock. The songwriter sings of hope, the fulfillment of God’s own dream of peace for the holy city, of healing for a hurting creation, of mending of all kinds of brokenness in our lives and in our world. A vision to hope for in this season of Advent—the season of waiting; a vision sung about by the band U2 in their latest album, released this week: “I can see the lights in front of me,” sings Bono. “I believe my best days are ahead.” A vision sketched in John the Baptist’s fiery words about One who is still to come; and sketched again in Second Peter’s hope for something new beyond conflagration. A vision that writer Peter Rollins says can be lived today in what he calls “pyro-theology.” Theology that sets the church ablaze—a burning church that illuminates the neighborhoods and world around it; church like a flaming beacon calling to the broken and the hurting and the skeptics and those who need a break; people who need good news in the midst of chaos; people who need songs and dreams that offer hope. “I believe with a steadfast faith,” Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “that there can never be a situation that is utterly, totally hopeless.” I believe it in my belly, he says.

...I’d like to share a story of hope in the midst of what seems hopeless. It’s told by Mitch Kahn, a firefighter who has battled wildfires in California. “I’ve battled many large blazes in my 18 years of firefighting,” writes Kahn. “So I had no illusions about what was ahead when the call came last October to our Laguna Hills, California, station house. … We raced toward the wall of smoke and flames that towered in the hills above us. … We made our first stand in

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a residential area near the city of Irvine. For 23 hours straight we fought alongside other emergency units to keep a spur of the fire from destroying a neighborhood. Then the wind shifted. ... I had only one reaction: horror. ... Fifty-mile-per-hour winds whipped the air. On one side of the road waves of fire—high as the biggest ocean waves—swept down a hill ... . It looked as if hell itself were rising up through the earth. ... A few miles away nestled three tiny rural communities ... . 'If the fire crosses the road,' the strike team leader's voice crackled over my radio, 'there's nothing to stop it from destroying those communities.' ... [A] hot ember flew like a rocket and landed right on [our] hose, bursting it. Water gushed on the ground. ... We would have to evacuate. The radio crackled. It was the strike team leader. 'There's a spot fire below you and it's growing,' he warned. 'We can't put it out. Move the men into the burn. Get into the black’ ... [The “black” is] an area that had already burned, where no more fuel for a fire remained. In theory, that was supposed to create a safe zone. ... The black zone was at the top of a second hill, a ragged patch of earth maybe 50 feet by 20 feet beyond which flames still burned. ... I heard the strike team leader conveying our situation to the command center. 'Can you get a helicopter over here?' he asked. Fire Service helicopters carry tanks of water to douse wildfires from above. 'These guys are surrounded.' ... A voice came on through the crackle. 'Negative, we do not have air support available.' ... [Another captain and I] eyed [our] men—men who were looking to us for direction. 'We're getting ready to deploy the shelters,' [the other captain] said [on the radio]. Fire shelters are one-man fireproof tents lined with epoxy fiberglass. Deploying the shelters is] the most chilling message a firefighter could ever send, the equivalent of Mayday. Just saying those words sent a bolt of fear through me. Always, there had been help at the ready in the wildfires I'd fought. ... Not this time. The winds were so fierce, they blew the flames horizontally. 'Get into your shelters,' I ordered. The men stared at me. Never in the history of the county had anyone given such an order. ... The men unfolded their tents and crawled inside. Then I did the same. ... I stretched out on the ground and willed myself to remain calm. I knew we weren't totally safe. ... Firefighters in other states had died when their shelters were overwhelmed by flames ... . All we could do was wait. And pray. I thought of [my wife] and our kids ... . All around me I could hear the crackling fire. I grasped the interior walls with both hands to keep the heat from coming up under the tent. The heat grew intense, almost unbearable, like an oven. ... Lord, I prayed, I've done all I can. ... At that moment a peace settled over me. ... Minutes passed. The very air around me seemed about to explode. I buried my face in my arm, trying to shield it. ... Then the radio crackled to life. 'Here comes your drop,' the strike team leader said. My heart pounded. Could it be? ... I could hear a helicopter approach. Then, a great whoosh. Tons of water dropped down on the hillside. The air went silent. Where fire had roared, now there was only a damp hiss. From below I could hear the sound of chainsaws starting up. Fire crews were on their way, cutting a path through fallen trees toward us. I waited a few minutes, then peeked out of my shelter. A corridor was carved down the hill. The flames blocking our exit had all disappeared. One by one, the men emerged from their shelters. All were okay. ... [We] staggered down the hill. Safe. ... I wanted to laugh, to celebrate, to call home just to hear [my wife's] voice, and the kids. But there wasn't time. The fire still raged and the wind had returned. There was more work to do.”

...That story reminds me of the church: embattled at times, as in the fiery days of Second Peter; prophetic, like incendiary John the Baptist; igniting flames of hope, like the songs in Second Isaiah; saved by the deluging waters of baptism; but always burning as a beacon of light. And always busy with more work to do. Amen.