

“Advent Fire”  
Luke 3:1-6, 15-17  
First Sunday of Advent

December 1, 2024  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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As you just heard, our preacher today is John the Baptist.  
And as you just heard, John has three sermons for us today.

That’s right.

Three sermons.

You may not have realized you were listening to three sermons.  
But I imagine you’ll remember the first one right away.

It has something to do with fire.

“I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

John’s talking about the fire of judgment.

The fire of repentance.

The fire that cleanses every soul in the room of sin, and leads us to new life with God.

Now I think repenting—which is something ALL OF US need to do—I think it gets a bad rap.

How many of you have a Christmas “to do” list?

How many of you have “repent” at the top of your list?

Right.

Repenting gets a bad rap.

But I wish that were not true.

Because repentance, true repentance, is one of the most hopeful things that a person can do.

It's about changing direction.  
Going a new way.  
Living a new life.

Have you ever seen someone do it?  
Have you ever seen someone take to heart the first sermon John  
preached to us today?

When Diana Shertenlieb was asked by a priest if she would be  
interested in corresponding with an inmate on death row, her first  
answer was no.

But then she changed her mind.

And she says that she chose Josh Bishop because he was the  
youngest person on the list.

At the time, he was only 22 years old.

Why was Bishop on death row?

Because three years earlier, he killed a man in process of hijacking  
the man's car. In 1996, a Georgia jury convicted Josh Bishop, and he  
was given a death sentence.

So Diana Shertenlieb started writing this young man.  
And Bishop wrote back right away.

The two exchanged letters with greater and greater frequency, the  
relationship grew, and then Diana Shertenlieb decided that she wanted to  
meet Josh Bishop.

She was surprised by the young man that she found.

“He just wasn’t what I expected,” she said. “He just seems to be one of my kids.”

But he didn’t grow up like one of her kids.

Court records showed that Josh Bishop had a traumatic childhood. Father was gone, mother was addicted to alcohol and drugs, which meant Josh and his brother lived in and out of foster homes.

Sometimes they were homeless.

Many days, they were hungry, and foraged for leftover food in garbage bins.

Of course, Shertenlieb could change none of that, but what she could do was visit. And during the course of their visits, Shertenlieb began to tell Josh Bishop about her faith.

Evangelism wasn’t her goal, she said.

“I just...wanted him to know that someone on the outside was thinking of him and praying for him.”

Gradually, a spark—a small flame of faith—began to kindle in Josh Bishop.

And Bishop’s life began to change.

He started attending mass.

At age 23, he was baptized by the Archbishop of Atlanta.

He offered abject apologies to the families of his victims.

He worked with a clinic at Mercer Law School, teaching students about justice, lessons that they could never learn in the classroom.

For nearly 20 years, the Shertenliebs—Diana and her husband—grew to love Josh Bishop. But much to Diana Shertenlieb’s frustration, appeals for clemency were unsuccessful, and Bishop was executed on March 31, 2016 by the state of Georgia.

But before he died, Bishop wrote the following:

“The family of the church has saved me,” he said.

“Every day is not a picnic,  
but I try every day to live my Christian faith  
by doing something positive with my life.

“Society with the death penalty says we are unredeemable.  
But the change in me says...[that’s not true].  
I must...offer my life up  
to give back anything I can...  
to those I hurt and those that live around me.”

“I had lost my trust in people,” he said, “But she [Diana Shertenlieb] brought me back into the arms of God.”<sup>1</sup>

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I wonder if that was the fire that John preached about in his first sermon. Because it wasn’t just Josh Bishop whose life had turned around.

Diana Shertenlieb’s life was changed too!

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<sup>1</sup> This story comes from three sources: Andrew Nelson, “Friendship between Catholic and death row inmate began with a letter,” *The Georgia Bulletin*, October 16, 2014; Obituary for Josh Bishop, at <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/josh-bishop-obituary?pid=179559540>. I first became aware of the story through Tom Long’s book, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

She wasn't going to reach out. When her priest asked about writing a letter, her first response was no. But then...she changed her mind.

Or maybe I should say, the Holy Spirit changed her mind.  
Pushed her, prodded her, ignited a fire inside of her...

I wonder if there's anyone here like that today.

I wonder if there's anyone here who needed to hear the first sermon John preached, about repenting, changing direction, trusting in God and doing something NEW...

Maybe that's you.  
But as I said, we heard three sermons from John.

And the second sermon is a much shorter sermon.  
It was in our first text for today.

In the seventh chapter of Luke's Gospel, John receives a report from his disciples about the ministry of Jesus.

They tell him everything that Jesus is doing:  
The healing. The preaching. The forgiving.  
Even the dead are raised!

So John sends two of his disciples back to Jesus, with a very curious question:

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

That's the second sermon you heard from John today.  
It's a one-sentence sermon, but it's a powerful sermon.  
What in the world would make John preach that sermon?

Because if I'm not mistaken, it sounds like John is questioning everything he preached back in chapter 3!

Like he's confused by Jesus.

Disappointed by Jesus.

Why?

Because John was expecting FIRE from Jesus.

And that fire...it didn't burn the way John thought it would burn.

In his first sermon, John's hopes were like this.

But by his second sermon, John's hopes were like this.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

I know it's only a one-sentence sermon, but it's a powerful sermon. Because within that sermon is the question of where our hope is going to come from.

Is our hope for the future going to come from us?

From what we expect God to do with our life,

so that our future will look just like the future

we had mapped out in our mind?

Or will our hope come from the mind and imagination of God?

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A little over 50 years ago, John McClamrock was a 17-year-old boy who bounded out of bed one October afternoon in Dallas, threw on his bell-bottom jeans and headed to Hillcrest High School.

He was, according to a girl he dated, “the All-American boy, just heartbreakingly beautiful.” He was a football player. That afternoon, covering a kickoff return for the Hillcrest Panthers, he dove to make a tackle.

His head collided with the other boy's thigh, and suddenly John wasn't moving.

The ambulance carried him to Presbyterian Hospital.

Doctors asked his mother, Ann, what religion she was.

They suggested she call her priest, because it did not look like John would make it through the night.

Fifty-four-year-old Ann McClamrock looked at the doctors, her hands trembling, and said, "My Johnny is not going to die. You wait and see. He is going to have a good life."

John made it through the night, and then another, and then more.

But he was permanently paralyzed from the neck down.

After six months in the hospital, they called the family in for a conference. John's neck injury was so bad that he could not sit up in a wheelchair.

One of the staffers then said, "We have found that ninety-five percent of families cannot handle this kind of care. Here is a list of nursing homes that would be good for your son."

At this, his mother stood up and said, "We will be taking Johnny home, thank you."

And that's exactly what she did.

They fixed up his room with a hospital bed.

Every day, his mother fed him, bathed him, changed him, and turned him to prevent bedsores from developing. His mother never left him, except on Sunday mornings when she would go to church, and John's brother, Henry, would watch over him.

About once a year he'd have a life-threatening medical crisis, but he always made it through somehow. Whenever he came home from the hospital, his mother would say, "Johnny, I'm so proud of you."

At night, they would watch television together, and then before going to bed, they always read together a Prayer of Thanksgiving printed on a little laminated card, which ended with these words:

"Lord Jesus, may I always trust in your generous mercy and love. I want to praise you, now and forever. Amen."

Much to everyone's surprise, John made it to his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. And then his 40<sup>th</sup>. And then his 50<sup>th</sup>.

In 2007, when John was in his early 50s and Ann was 88, she fell at home and broke her shoulder. She had to be hospitalized, but she left two days early (against doctor's orders) to get home to care for John.

It was then she added another line to the prayer of thanksgiving:

"Please God, let me live one day longer than John, so that I may care for him."

In January, 2008, Ann and John and Henry celebrated Ann's 89<sup>th</sup> birthday. Days later John was taken to the hospital, only this time the end was near.

Henry brought Ann to the hospital to visit.

Smoothing back his hair, Ann McClamrock looked at her beloved boy and promised, "Johnny, we'll be back together soon."

"I know we will," John said.

Then he told his mother something he had never said before:



“I know how hard it’s been for you.”

“Hard?” Ann asked. “Johnny, it’s been an honor.”

The next day, John died quietly.

And three weeks later, Ann McClamrock died too.<sup>2</sup>

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Now...do you remember what the first Advent candle stands for?  
What’s the fire, the flame that burns to my left stand for?

Hope, that’s right.

I think Ann McClamrock is someone who heard John preach his second sermon.

It’s a sermon about hope.

But not the hope we give ourselves.

It’s about the hope that can only come from God.

Just like John the Baptist didn’t get to say—

this is how God will fulfill my hopes...

neither do we.

It may sound like discouraging news, but I submit that it’s the good news of the gospel. Because here’s the FASCINATING thing about John the Baptist.

He wasn’t wrong.

When he said Jesus was coming with the Holy Spirit and fire?

He wasn’t wrong. He just couldn’t see how it would happen.

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<sup>2</sup> I first ran across this story in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, “Fix My Life,” preached on April 26, 2010 at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York. The story originally appeared in “Still Life,” by Skip Hollandsworth, *Texas Monthly*, May, 2009.

Do you remember what happens in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts?

When the apostles are gathered on the day of Pentecost, Luke writes:

“Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them...  
All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Do see what that means?

The Church—body of Christ—each of you—  
are born of the Holy Spirit and fire.

You see, the third sermon John preached isn't a one sentence sermon.

It's a one-word sermon.  
And that word is...*you*.

Every time you repent when you've missed the mark,  
every time you carry someone's burdens,  
even if they cannot do the same for you...

every time you forgive someone who has wounded you,  
every time you love the person who has been unkind to you,

every time you take a chance with your faith,  
every time you step forward with hope instead of fear...  
the fire and light of God—  
the risen Christ himself—  
promises to be born in you...

Amen.