

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Tending the Fire”
2nd in the series *Advent Longing*
Isaiah 55:1-9
December 17, 2017

Shelly is halfway done with her Christmas shopping. It's 11:30 pm. The kids are already asleep.

She's completely exhausted, but she's surfing the web looking for a few more gifts. She still has to find something for her mom. But nothing seems right. No matter what she gets, she knows she will hear the sound of her mother's critical voice. Shelly's mom is just not satisfied with anything in life since her dad died 8 years ago.

Shelly goes back over the list she has for her two boys, 8 and 10, and her 15-year-old daughter. She knows that her ex-husband always goes overboard. Of course, he can. He's got a corporate job. He wasn't the one to stay home with the kids when they were young.

Shelly, on the other hand, just restarted her career three years ago after the divorce. She doesn't have half the income of her ex. Of course she knows that presents aren't everything and her kids love her, but she can't help but want to out-do her ex-husband this year. Besides, rumor has it she might get a bonus. You never know.

It's 11:30. She's exhausted, but her adrenaline is pumping. Palms sweaty, she adds a few more things to her Amazon cart, ignores the total, clicks on the button "complete purchase."

She closes the laptop.

She walks to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

And a voice whispers:

*Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come buy and eat!*

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and labor for that which does not satisfy?*

*Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

*Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.*

Of course, it wasn't an audible voice. More like an intuition in her gut that comes out of nowhere. But it was a strong voice, nonetheless.

Shelly's eyes fill with tears as she brushes her teeth.

Her tears and toothpaste foaming saliva swirl together in the sink... and slip away down the drain.

Last week we explored how there is restlessness, a longing at the center of every human life. We humans don't spend most of our life serene and at peace with only occasional moments of unease. It's really the opposite.

We are desiring/restless creatures at our core...

The Greeks said that this restlessness was fired into us by the madness of the gods.

Christians throughout our history have said that we've been struck by the love of God... We've been made with longing desire. It's a gift given to us to wake us up to the love that birthed us into this world... to lead us to the heart of God.

Last week I quoted St. John of the Cross as he describes the living flame of love that tenderly wounds our soul. And I quoted Augustine who said our souls are restless until they rest in God.

But on the off chance that those didn't resonate with you, how about the lyrics from one of our great cultural theologians,

Bruce Springsteen: "*Everybody's got a hungry heart*," he sang.

That's where we start... because your "Spirituality" is basically what we do with that hungry heart...

with that longing in us,
with that fire of life stirring in your gut.

Shelly thought spirituality was just stuff like church and prayer. She didn't know that her spirituality is also part of what is happening at 11:30 at night, with her anger at her ex, and her desire to be loved by her mom and her kids... and her amazon shopping. But it is.

It's all deeply spiritual

Because your spirituality is what you do with that hungry heart.

[pause]

Jackson has been pulling 12 hour days at the office all year. On the weekends, his phone keeps him tethered to the demands of his job like a dog on a leash. He keeps telling himself that after the next deadline things will slow down.

But they never do.

There is always something.

His wife has been complaining that he works too much, but he's not sure what to do about that. The good news is that his boss is so happy with his profits, that they are giving everyone the week after Christmas off this year.

Jackson knows that if he can just plow through, then he'll get to spend some time with his 2-year-old daughter and his 7-year-old son. Maybe he can even get a sitter and take his wife out on a date. It's been a long time since they've done anything with just the two of them.

Christmas morning finally comes. Jackson, his wife, and 2 little kids are all in their pajamas. There's a fire in the fireplace. The kids are excitedly opening their presents. And in that moment... it dawns on Jackson: ***He has no idea what the kids are getting.***

He looks over, sees the excitement on his wife's face... as she's watching them open the gifts that she picked out, and she wrapped, and she put under the tree for the two of them. But Jackson had no part in it.

Jackson looks back at his little girl and boy... and a sinking thought creeps into his mind:
"I've become a stranger in my own house."

When he looks back into the fireplace, he hears the whisper too:

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and labor for that which does not satisfy?*

*Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

*Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.*

It's an invitation to our souls. Because our hungry hearts are feasting on something and often it's something that "does not satisfy." Not "rich food" of God's love our souls long for. But it is defining our spirituality. Spirituality is what you do with that holy hunger in you. How you channel it... where it takes you. It is all the things we do with the fire inside of us.

Jackson's never thought about all the energy that drives him at work as being part of his spirituality, but it is.

That's part of what our spirituality can be for...
to give us energy and drive and creativity...
That is part of its gift... if it's channeled well.

But for Jackson...
his holy fire is beginning to scorch his family.

That's why tending the fire in you is so essential.
Your spirituality...

It can create life or destroy it.
It can be beautiful or horrific.
It can fill you with passion and creativity...
And can give you the energy to work for the poor...
and care for those you love...
and turn your life into heat and life and joy
for those around you.

Or your spiritual energy can burn you up
and leave you empty...
...wounding your soul and wounding those around you.

The difference between a healthy spirituality and an unhealthy spirituality is the difference between a spirituality that is leaving you more integrated, and whole, and full of life...

and a spirituality that is leaving you more empty and wounded.
It's the difference between one that is putting your soul together,
and one that is tearing your soul apart.

And so I wonder, do you know... what you are doing with your hunger? ...That hunger that was made by God... and for God...

Because all of us have it... you know.

Everyone has a spirituality because yes, Bruce Springsteen, *"Everyone has a hungry heart."*

How is your hunger driving your life?

What are you doing with that holy longing, that desire, that restlessness in you?

Allen is 17 and a senior in high school. He still can't decide what he's going to do when he graduates. It's the second night of Christmas break and he knows he needs to figure it out. So, he's online looking at colleges...

When... out of nowhere... something pops up on his screen. It's a provocative image.

Something in him stirs. There's so much skin.

He hesitates... He hungers. He tries to resist.

...but before he knows it, he clicks on the picture... and is taken into another world.

Allen's spirituality is stoked over the red-hot coals...that will flare up the fire in him as fast as a pile of dried up leaves...

And it will burn out just as quickly.

There will be nothing left but a heap of smoking ash...
and stinging eyes.

The next day Allen goes to the Christmas Eve service at his grandma's church. The lights are dim. The candles are lit... And in the music, he hears the whisper.

*Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters
You that have not money, come buy and eat!*

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?
and labor for that which does not satisfy?*

*Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

*Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.*

Can you hear it too? That whisper in your soul?
It's a question to your longing heart.

*Why do you spend your money on what is not bread?
And Labor for that which does not satisfy?*

It's like a distant echo of the angel's song... calling to the shepherds ... drawing you to the manger where the love of God is taking on holy flesh. "Come to me that you might live."

To a crowd of hungry hearts Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not be hungry."

And to a thirsty woman at the well Jesus said, “those that drink the water I give will never be thirsty... because the water I give will become a spring of living water gushing up to an eternal kind of life.”

Jesus isn't talking about a one-time decision or a belief statement.

Jesus is talking about your spirituality... what you do with your hunger, your longing, your restlessness... that fiery energy that God forged in your soul.

And he says, “I am the bread of life. I am the living water. Come and drink.”

You see, when God comes to us in this manger,

when Jesus is born,

God's own life becomes fused with creation.

The fire of God's love flows into our concrete, physical world.

And the whole world becomes filled with the spirit of God. It becomes spiritual... alive with presence and mystery.

This is the great gift of Christmas. This is the hidden reality behind the wrapping paper...

a reality that we don't recognize or acknowledge most of the time,
but we feel it. We feel it stirring in our hungry hearts.

And so, at some point we have to ask, what will we do with the fire of God's love forged in our soul? What will we do with this gift of Christmas?

Will you tend the fire?

or will you let it burn up in a flash?

Will you channel that life...

or will you let it flicker out?

A member of the congregation emailed me this week with a personal reflection after my sermon last week. He described the fire of life in him as a gift... a gift that can keep burning if he carefully tends its embers.

And compared that to the days when houses had wood stoves and a householder would **bank the fire** to keep it alive at night.

I had a guess of what he meant, but I wasn't sure exactly what “banking a fire” was. So I googled it. Thank you internet.

Of course, you all probably know. You don't need an explanation. [awkward pause]... but I'm going to tell you anyway.

Banking a fire is where you take all the hot coals, push them together, and gently cover them with ashes. It will keep the coals alive all night so the fire can be easily restarted in the morning.

The warmth, the light, the heat... it keeps it going.

That is exactly what God invites us to do... with the gift of Christmas. God's own fiery love comes into our lives. Now we have to ask ourselves, how will we bank the coals?

And I want to invite you to get very practical with that question this year. What's one way you will tend the holy fire that God placed in your soul?
What is one thing?

I wonder what is one thing Shelly might do to tend the fire burning in her? Or Jackson? Or Allen?

It can be simple. Maybe it's as simple and as profound as the little drummer boy... playing his drum for Christ...

Maybe you simply need to play your drum for Christ... instead of for yourself... doing the simple work you do... for Christ and not yourself.

Maybe it's something else. Maybe to tend the fire of life in you, you need to start practicing gratitude every day. Writing 5 things you are grateful for every night before you turn off the light.

Maybe you could tend the fire of love in you by turning off all your personal devices after dinner so you can be more present to people in your life.

Maybe it's the practice of praying each morning... taking a moment of time each day to be present to God and to your soul.

Maybe to bank the coals and keep the fire alive you need to celebrate more... or renew some friendships... or remember how to play and have fun again. St. John of the Cross said playfulness is the height of spirituality.

What is one way you will tend the holy longings in your soul this year?

Maybe... for you... there is something bigger that needs to be addressed... something you need to do or something you need to change or some decision you need to make.

Whatever it is, I want to invite you to write it down on your card and in a moment I'm going to ask you to bring it to the manger.

Because ***the manger... is an icon of our souls***. It is the place where God's life flows into us... where the fire of life is kindled in us,
and it is the place where holy longings burn in us.

So I want to invite you to commit to one practice for tending to your spirituality... by placing it in this open manger.

And begin to reflect as Stephanie begins to play for us.

In a few moments we'll begin to sing...

and I'll invite you forward for communion.

And when you come forward... you can bring your commitment to the manger.

Take a moment. Listen to the holy longing in you. How will you tend the fire of life in your soul?

The One who came to us in the Manger... comes to us now in the table.

This is the bread our hearts hunger for.

Jesus said this is my body. Broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

This is the cup our souls are thirsty for.

Jesus said, this cup is lifeblood, poured out for you. Do this in remembrance of me.