

“Embracing New Ways”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42:1-4

New Testament Lesson: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I'm sure you've heard of the wildfires burning in California this year. Just tragic. One technique in firefighting is to create what's called a "safety fire." A safety fire is used when the fire is out of control and threatening to rage right over top the firefighters, burning them alive.

The first ever safety fire was used in 1949. A team of 15 firefighters parachuted into a remote area of Montana called Mann Gulch to fight a firestorm. After hours of battling the blaze, the team leader saw his men trying to outrun a speeding wall of flame. He realized they were in a losing battle.

In desperation, he decided to risk something new, something nobody had ever done before. Instead of running away from the fire, the team leader stopped, turned toward the blaze, and started another fire, between himself and the wildfire. Most of his men thought their team leader had gone out of his mind.

When he yelled for them to join him behind this new fire, they chose to continue trying to outrun the main fire. As the smaller fire burned toward the main blaze, it drew a safety zone behind itself that allowed the squad leader and two other men to escape. It had never been done before, but it worked.

As we contemplate today's scripture passage, we'll look at what it takes to set aside everything you know, everything you believe in, all that you're so sure of and try something new, trust in something new.

Today's sermon, "Embracing New Ways," is the second in our four-part series titled "Jesus – The Man; the Miracle Worker." Let's step back in history even further than 1949 and that first-ever safety fire. Let's go all the way back to the year 29, which is the year – or thereabouts – when Jesus was baptized.

You're living in Palestine near the town of Bethany on the eastern banks of the Jordan River. You hear about a man in the wilderness baptizing people with water, in the Jordan. Deciding to take a look, you approach John surrounded by a crowd of people and he's shouting: "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.

Like others, you had been wondering if this man named John might be the Messiah, the savior of Israel spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah. But hearing what he's saying, maybe not. Maybe someone different, someone new is coming. This new prophet will not only baptize with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. "His winnowing-fork is in his hand," says John, "to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

And you're wondering to yourself, "Am I chaff or wheat? Am I to be burned with unquenchable fire or gathered into safety, as someone useful to the Lord?" Well, the truth is – for all of us – we are both chaff and wheat, both in need of having a fire lit under us and in need of being reminded just how precious we are in God's eyes and useful!

When you're procrastinating something that needs to get done, you need a little fire in the belly to get you going. When we are sure we're right and all the world is wrong, we need the flames of divine truth to burn away our stubborn self-righteousness.

When you are down on yourself and feeling useless, you need the warm fires of the Lord's unconditional love to purify your thoughts and feelings, to bring you back into full knowledge of just how special you are to God, and how much God desires to achieve for you and through you.

Last week, I asked you to think of a project or decision you are struggling with, or something you feel called to, but it just seems to be falling apart. Maybe it's in the area of your career or job. Maybe you need to give up a bad habit or get over an old hurt or disappointment. For some folks, there's that recurring question or doubt – about what they believe, how they're living their life, who they're hanging out with, how they're spending their time.

Whatever it is that's escaping you, troubling you, or weighing you down, there's only one way to make real and lasting progress. Try something new, making sure that it's something in keeping with the sacred truths, creative spirit, and bold conviction of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus appeared in the wilderness with John, John saw it was time for something new – baptism by the Holy Spirit! No longer would water alone be sufficient to cleanse or purify people, as in the Jewish purification ritual. No, we need God's very Spirit upon us to truly repent of our sins, turn from our misguided ways and embrace new life in Jesus Christ.

Of course, we as human beings naturally fight and resist new things. We find it hard to know if it's the right way to go, or are we being led astray.

John the Baptizer preached a baptism of repentance. Jesus preached a baptism of salvation, through repentance and love, repentance of our misguided ways, and a selfless, sacrificial love of God and neighbor.

While John was lifting Jesus up out of the waters of the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form and God called him “Beloved.” Jesus, the man, fully human, was empowered and equipped by the Spirit of God for a miraculous and blessed future through the power of love, and through our love of Jesus, we too, are able to work miracles and live truly blessed lives. When we are willing to embrace the sacred truths, creative spirit, and bold conviction of Jesus amid any struggle we’re facing – whether it’s vocational, personal, emotional or spiritual – that’s when we find a new and miraculous way forward, no matter what has us stuck or trapped.

Those firefighters at the beginning of our sermon were facing the greatest odds imaginable. But there was one among them who dug deep for the courage and inspiration to do something miraculous that day, out of his great love for his men. You, too, have it in you to do or begin something miraculous, today; to be a miracle worker!

Being a miracle worker takes trying something new, embracing new ways, and that’s not easy, it’s hard. The reason we hesitate or fall short is because embracing new ways always means opening ourselves up to the unexpected.

How we approach the unexpected in life will be the focus of next Sunday’s sermon. So for this week, let’s spend some time thinking and praying about what new approach might God want you to take in overcoming that struggle you’ve been thinking about.

What fears arise for you as you think about trying something new? What questions do you have as you wonder whether or not it’s the right way to go, the best thing to try? Bring those questions with you next week as we continue to seek a way forward.

God’s greatest desire for you and your life is that you be who God created you to be and achieve what God would have you achieve. As long as we remain open to embracing new ways – and overcoming any fears and uncertainties that are blocking us – we are assured of a blessed, fruitful, miraculous life, each and every one us, as followers of Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Father in heaven, at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit.

Grant that all us who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant we have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior.

For you are our Savior, Lord, the one who works the miracle of salvation, and the miracles of our daily lives.

We ask your Spirit of inspiration and courage where we need to open ourselves to new possibilities.

We ask your Spirit of healing and comfort upon all who suffer this day. We pray, too, for our country, and particularly for those federal workers effected by the government shutdown. Soften the hearts of our leaders that they may come together in unity to fulfill their calling, and in so doing, reflect your glory.

We pray this in your powerful name, O Lord, suing the words you taught us, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**