

30-Apr-2017 Sermon “BOP”

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This is Charlie Parker, one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. I play him today because he was one of the leading figures behind Bebop—or “Bop” for short—in the 40’s and 50’s. And although we’re not talking about music today, I wanted something for us to remember this message. To remember BOP. Today’s message is about BOP.

To Luke. Such a critical passage, because it comes almost at the end of his gospel and therefore just before the start of his next book, Acts, and so it forms a bridge from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to the birth and faith of the Church. But at the heart of this passage and at the heart of our lives is the concept of *hiddenness*. *Hiddenness*. We talk about God a fair deal, and we may think about God a fair deal, but if we’re honest with ourselves, for most of the time God is hidden to us. He’s a little like the friend at the Mariners game you’re watching on TV, when you’re hoping to catch a glimpse of him when the camera turns to the crowd. “Is that him? I can’t tell. Wait—there?” We *want* to see God, but He’s hidden. It’s frustrating.

The Psalms in particular are full of people complaining to God about His hiddenness. “Where are you?” is a theme in about half the Psalms. Now on one hand we’re used to hiddenness because we’re used to stories, where there’s almost always hiddenness. We sit down to a TV show or a movie and soon someone is murdered, or someone steals something, or someone wants to fall in love, or someone has gotten lost in the woods and ended up in a house with seven short men funny names. How it will all get resolved is hidden to us. But we’re confident that in 30 or 60 minutes or a couple of hours at most, the hiddenness will disappear and all will be revealed.

Wish it were true in real life. The real danger of television is that we wish our lives could be like television. Wish it were true. The hiddenness of God seems to be one of the most persistent features of the life of faith. When, we wonder, will God deal with my loneliness, or my physical pain, or my financial issues? We may wonder, like the disciples in this story, “Are you the only one who does not know the things that have taken place?”

Although we do not talk about it much in the Church, we are well familiar with the hiddenness of God. We turn on the television and see conflict and strife and risk of danger; we look outside our homes and we see the homeless and the working poor and those crushed in spirit; we look in our own hearts and our lives and we might ask with the Psalmist, “Just where *are* you?” It’s hard to care when you don’t think God is there.

The thing is—we want to decrease God’s hiddenness, but *He* wants increase our *power*. We want to decrease God’s hiddenness, but *He* wants increase our *power*.

So what, in God’s economy, *is* God’s power? And how do we get access to it? This passage shows us the way, and the way is BOP. B-O-P, Bop. It stands for “Burning,” “Opening” and “Proclaiming.”

Burning. Cleopas and the other disciple ask one another, “Were our hearts not *burning* within us while he was talking to us on the road?” (Lk 24:32).

Many great stories of power begin with burning. A man in a garden is in great torment because of the hiddenness of God and the enormous storm in the depths of his soul, accompanied by a mighty rain of tears. He prays, "And thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever?" And then he hears a child singing "Take it and read; take it and read," and he thinks it strange because he has never heard a child's song like that. So he picks up a Bible and reads the first passage he finds: "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness..." (R 13:13). And as Augustine wrote later, "I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away" (Confessions, 8:12).

In the 16th century a Spanish monk named St. John of the Cross writes specifically about burning, from his own experience saying that "The soul is purged and prepared... just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark characteristics that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself. (*The Dark Night of the Soul*, II: 10:1). God brings about burning; God uses burning to make a thing of beauty.

A young pastor has just returned to England from America, crushed in spirit. He can lead others to faith in Christ but he himself has no assurance that he even *has* a relationship with Christ. One day, in the morning, he hears a church choir singing Psalm 130: "Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy." It is the cry of one who knows the hiddenness of God. Let's pick up the story from his journal: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle

to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” John Wesley felt the burning of God.

In April 1906, in Los Angeles, revival meetings are beginning at 312 Azusa Street in a small building that had been most recently used as a stable. The flies were still thick in the air. The participants—mostly African Americans but some whites--were criticized by the media and Christian theologians for behaviors considered to be outrageous and unorthodox. But in one month there were anywhere from 300 to 1500 people trying to get into the building at any one time to hear the preaching and to see what God was doing. They burned for the presence of God. And today, the revival is considered by historians to be the primary catalyst for the spread of Pentecostalism in the 20th century. And now there are 500 million Pentecostals around the world.

It can start with one prayer. Our prayer can be, “God, come burn in me. Be the living flame of love in me.” That was essentially Augustine’s prayer, and St. John of the Cross’, and John Wesley’s, and the prayer at Azusa Street. “God, come burn in me. Be the living flame of love in me.”

B in “Bop” for Burning. And “O” for Opening. Because burning is not enough.

The stories I just told you have one thing in common—that each person begins to burn for God and specifically, for the Word of God.

But in our passage today, there are two disciples who already know the Word of God. They have heard the Torah read devotionally every Saturday at Synagogue since they were born. They *knew* Torah and they *loved* Torah. But according to Jesus, reading Torah devotionally is not enough. He wanted them to read it *critically*. He wanted them to read it *scientifically*, if you will. His words may even seem a little harsh to us. “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” He says (Lk 24:25). He’s angry because He thinks they can do better. Cleopas and the other disciple *knew* the scripture; they *loved* the scripture, but Jesus needed to *open* it for them. And that’s what He does, for 2 ½ hours as they walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about the same distance from here to the Swinomish casino. “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (vs. 27).

Now there was not one of those verses that they hadn’t heard dozens of times before. Those scriptures *burned* in them with love. Just as the scriptures burn in us. But Jesus *opened* the scripture for them—He moves them from the place where they understand verses *devotionally*; from where they are simply connecting with the surface meaning, to the deeper meaning; to the meaning underneath, according to the Holy Spirit; to the *scientific* meaning of Isaiah and the Psalmist and Daniel—to the deeper meaning that maybe even the writers weren’t aware of. He *opens* the Scriptures and moves them to *critical* reading. I remember my high school chemistry class where the teacher opened the world: what I perceived as trees and people and air were also things full of elements and molecules and compounds, each that had properties that I could learn. And the teacher pushed me to try harder and get at the deeper reality.

And two times Luke uses this beautiful word “open”: first, when Jesus breaks the bread, their eyes were opened; and second, when they say, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” and the breaking of the bread and the opening of the scriptures are the same act, the same scientific act where Jesus

reveals how the universe really works, beyond appearances, beyond the surface, beyond devotion. He moves them to *critical* reading and reveals Himself in the breaking of the bread. From burning to opening.

And then He *disappears*. Because while we want to reduce the hiddenness of God, He wants to increase our power. The power of the New Testament. You can be just as skeptical about the New Testament as you want—that the writers made up the miracles, that whatever Jesus was like, the authors embellished. But you cannot deny that they took themes from the Old Testament and radically changed them. They took themes like resurrection and Temple and the Law, and they radically changed them. Just one example—the theme of Messiah. Messiah was to come and to be king and to vanquish the Romans and bring light to the Gentiles and usher in the end times, but *Messiah wasn't supposed to die*. No one in the Old Testament thought that Messiah was going to die. But in the New Testament, everyone agrees that He *did* die. The authors drastically altered the theme of Messiah.

So what gave the authors of the New Testament the courage to radically reinterpret these themes from the Old Testament? There can be only one answer—they had *power* based on their experience of the risen Jesus. Without that power there would have been no New Testament. And they power even though Jesus was gone. He was hidden.

So when Jesus disappears in Emmaus, just as when He disappears from our lives, it's not really a crisis. The hiddenness doesn't bother them. He has built on their burning. He has opened their eyes to reading the scriptures critically; He has played the role of the scientist to expose how the universe works. And now they have power; and power in the New Testament is always for proclaiming. That is the "P" in BOP—proclaiming. Proclaiming to ourselves, proclaiming to the

church, and proclaiming to the world.

So these disciples--they feel mission now—the same mission we feel, the same mission the Church has always felt: the mission of proclamation. Back they go to Jerusalem. Another 2 ½ hours. And they told the church what had happened on the road, and how He had been revealed. Because theology is for proclamation. Proclamation with our mouths and with our hands. We want to decrease God's hiddenness, but God wants to increase our power.

So you may be thinking to yourself that you're not ready yet for proclamation—you don't have the time or it would take too great a change in you. I get that. I'm like that. You may be wondering just how you can start reading the Scriptures critically—especially if, right now, you don't read the Scriptures much at all. I get that, too. You may think, "Burning? My heart feels like one of those things you pull from the back of your freezer, wrapped up tight in plastic with all sorts of freezer burn. And you think, "What even *is* this?" I get that. My heart can be like that.

But the flame that burns the wood is the same flame that thaws the heart. And our part is to proclaim. And our part is to be the chemists and the biologists and the geologists when we come to scripture. And our part is to pray—here, at the altar--"Come, burn in me, living flame of love. Come, burn in me, living flame of love."