

**“THERMOSTAT BAPTISTS”**

***1 Thessalonians 1:1-10***

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

I’m preaching from two epistles, today. The first is Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, likely the earliest written book of the New Testament. Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia and was a major Roman port city—a great place to start a church. If it did well, its good reputation could spread more quickly. This is just how Paul gives thanks for them, “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known.” How do you do church? The Thessalonians know how to do church.

Others see them, and in seeing them, find not only hope, but also an example. Through difficulties and persecutions, they endured, having left their old ways to become a new kind of community. By their works, which they did with dynamism, with charismatic power, they exemplified Christ, and changed their lives, their city, their empire. By their bold witness, the God of the living Jesus worked in and through them to change the world.

But I’m also preaching from a second epistle, today—King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”—a portion of which we just heard read. King wrote the letter in the margins of a newspaper, the only paper available to him in the prison. He wrote it as a counterargument to an open letter from prominent liberal (white) Alabama clergymen, who called for patience from Civil Rights leaders. “Wait and let the justice system handle integration,” etcetera, etcetera. “Your non-violent protests are creating civil unrest,” etcetera, etcetera. King said, “I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’”

The two letters dovetail—to Thessalonica, to Birmingham. While Paul’s letter encourages the Thessalonians to maintain their vigorous faith, the Birmingham letter is an invitation for the whole church to reclaim its original spirit of courageous witness in ways that change the temperature of a given place and time. The church that dwelled in a racist land had become like a thermometer, simply reflecting the mores of a segregated society. But King calls especially moderate white churches to join up in the spirited discipleship of those who’re willing to face persecution for the sake of justice. We might say King is calling the church to rebuild its Thessalonian reputation by living “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction,” so that, as imitators of Christ, the world could see Christ in them, yes in their *gentle, blessing, loving ways*, but also their *disruptive, intrusive, meddlesome ways*.

At home during the colder months, it is common for my lovely bride to tell me, “It’s a little chilly in here, don’t you think?” This is her very endearing, cute, sweet way of saying, “You touched the thermostat without my permission.” Every couple here, everyone who’s ever had a roommate or housemate, knows how this goes. Our bodies acclimate to the climate differently and we want the weather a certain way. I think a wise pre-marital counseling question would be, “Okay, til death do you part, yada yada...How do you like your thermostat?” “I like it on 68...I like it on 75.” “This is never going to work.”

But this is the reputation I believe the early Christians had, and countless Christian communities since, including the early Baptists: they were the ones who set up camp in a certain place and meddled with the thermostat. Baptists injected a renewed zeal into a complacent church, seeking, at whatever the cost, the establishment of a true church—not a perfect one, but a true one, where everyone could see in its life and work the unmistakable presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The culture would begin to change by their witness, and the culture would yell throughout the house, “Who changed the thermostat?!” And someone would say, “Those confounded Baptists!”

Like a certain Daniel Featley, an Anglican theologian in the 1600s, who helped translate the King James Version of the Bible, but who strongly disliked and ridiculed the Baptists for being uneducated and working class, calling them “Anabaptists, heretics, mechanics, and illiterate men.”<sup>1</sup> He famously debated the formidable Baptist leader William Kiffin in 1642 on the issue of Baptism, and, after being Scripturally outsmarted, called Baptists “enemies” who were casting “balls of wildfire...into the bosom of our church.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was the consummate “balls of wildfire”-thrower. “I came to bring fire to the earth,” he tells his disciples, “and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Lk. 12:49). Yes, there is the Jesus who walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own. “He leadeth me beside still waters...” There is the Jesus who heals and comforts the brokenhearted. “Mary, why are you crying?...” There is the Jesus who sees little children coming, and does not stop them.

But then there is the Jesus who rides through the streets throwing Molotov cocktails of prophecy through the windows. There is the Jesus who mocks the hypocrites in the public square. The Jesus who stands flaring nostril to flaring nostril, staring down the self-righteous, a stone in his hand, and asks, “Who’s going to be the first to throw?” There is the Jesus who says, “Did you think I came to bring peace to the earth? No, but I tell you rather division. From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three” (12:51-52).

Flip through any gospel and randomly place your finger, and you have just as much of a chance of finding serene, prayerful, gentle Jesus as you do finding a Jesus moving through the countryside with fierce and inflammatory urgency, because he knows that humanity’s very salvation is at stake.

Someone wrote to King and said, “You’re in too much of a religious hurry...it’s taken 2000 years to get where we are...” To which King retorted, “[This is] a tragic misconception of time.” There is no inevitable flow of time. Time is neutral. “It can be used destructively or constructively.”

I know such an invitation can sound intimidating. There is only one MLK. We may not be called to start a movement. We may not be inclined to stand on the street corner with a bull horn to lead the march. We may not be the notable leader with a famous byline. We may not be able to preach like Paul or like King. But we don’t have to let our faith be privatized and

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<sup>1</sup> Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 80.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, 165.

domesticated either. We can be 5 or 95, but we don't have to tame our faith. We, too, have the capacity to throw balls of wildfire into the heart of our place and time. We, too, can practice what scholar Curtis Freeman calls "undomesticated dissent."

So, what does God have in mind for untamed, undomesticated Baptists to throw like "balls of wildfire" into our time and place? I ask this question, emboldened by the earliest Christians, who, simply by being the church, exposed the evils of infanticide, and taught the whole world what a desolating sacrilege such child sacrifices were. I'm emboldened by the Christians of antiquity who exposed the evils of gladiator contests and other forms of inhuman entertainment, and brought them to their end. I'm emboldened by the Christians of the Middle Ages, who were so formally hospitable to the aged and the dying, and who, simply by refusing to let people die alone, planted the seeds of what has come to be called "hospital."

Today, I'm emboldened by the unassuming and faithful witness of those from our own congregation who go around changing the temperature of our time and place, like spiritual arsonists, leaving sparks of the Holy Spirit wherever you go. I especially want to draw attention to those who are going into the prisons, to proclaim release to those in captivity, to worship with them, and to befriend them. You are like living stones—shards of flint—whose friction against the iron cages throws sparks that will, perhaps in 20 or 40 or 60 years, set fire to America's appalling prison-industrial complex, so that, in the end, there is not one stone lying on top of another. There are over 80,000 people in solitary confinement in this country. And it is torture. And it is wrong!

So, did you know you were involved in holy subterfuge? Simply by revealing the humanity of those we've been told have none, or don't deserve to. You're giving integrity to each word in our own church's motto: *Freedom. Friendship. Faith.* You're setting little fires around the perimeter of an evil system that, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, is destined to come crashing down. This is the good news!

The world has enough thermometer churches. But in our time and place, the only churches left are going to be the only ones that deserve to be. The ones so full of the Spirit that their reputations precede them. The ones who light up the night sky, whether by spark or by flame, by candlelight or by torch.

Later, Paul writes again to his friends in Thessalonica. He tells them Jesus will come again, revealed from heaven in flaming fire (2 Thess. 1:8). Would they recognize him? Will we? This combustible Jesus,  
this incendiary Jesus,  
    who sets fire to the earth,  
        and makes us all flame.