



**You have come to a blazing fire**

August 25th, 2019

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta

Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

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## **The Collect**

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## **The First Reading**    *Jeremiah 1:4-10*

The word of the Lord came to me saying,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me,



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"Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you,

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,

"Now I have put my words in your mouth.

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to  
pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

### **The Epistle**     *Hebrews 12:18-29*

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken-- that is, created things-- so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

### **Gospel**     *Luke 13:10-17*

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and



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be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

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*'As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters'.*

Words of the Roman philosopher Seneca, cited by modern day grand-magician and author of the Harry Potter books, J. K. Rowling, in her commencement address to the newly-minted graduates of Harvard University. *'I wish you all very good lives'*, are Rowling's final words, not hoping for them a life characterized by comfort and pleasure, but a life that is good for others.

I wonder if that is a question you have wrestled with yourself now and again: the degree to which your own life is good for others? It's a question that is ever-present in scripture, of course. This Sunday, it is Jeremiah's turn, as he asks how on earth he could offer anything good for others as a



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spokesperson for God, given his young age. It resonates with Moses' appeal, that his slowness of speech made him no match for the mighty Pharaoh, and with Isaiah's apparent belief that his unclean lips made him unworthy to speak of God at all. All the same, even the most casual reader of the Bible knows that God is having none of it. *'I have put my words in your mouth'*, God declares to Jeremiah, *'do not be afraid'*. Might we begin to dare, with Jeremiah, that the same could be true of us: that we might also speak of God?

As you consider that question, please do spare a thought this morning for our soon to be blessed Sunday school teachers, sent out to be prophets in our own time, not to kings nor to the rulers of armies, but to something far more terrifying: children. Who in their right mind would agree to confront a group of 4th graders about the meaning of life? Of course, it would be convenient, wouldn't it, if it were only Sunday school teachers who had to beware the questions of a child. The truth is, none of us are safe. You could be assuming the sanctuary and calm of a rocking chair at Kanuga when unbeknownst to you, a gaggle of middle school girls might suddenly appear with questions about the



book of Job and the meaning of suffering. Or perhaps you will be cornered at coffee hour by a curious kindergartner who is keen to hear your explanation as to why there are four gospels in the New Testament rather than just one. In fact, if look around you now, it's likely a budding theologian is weighing you up even as I speak.

My point is this: children are a gift to the church because by and large they are not afraid to ask questions, especially ones the grown-ups have forgotten to ask. It makes me think of a story I heard at a family funeral a couple of years back. As the deceased was approaching the end of her life she began to share childhood memories with her pastor, including the day that her baby brother was brought home from the hospital. As they entered the house, she asked her parents if she could hold the new arrival. When they said yes, she then asked if the two of them could be left alone. Her mom and dad, although a little nervous, agreed, but kept the door ajar so they could listen in. As the young girl cradled that precious new life in her arms, gently rocking him back and forth she leaned in and asked, *'Tell me about heaven, I'm beginning to forget'*.



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Children help us remember where we come from, and given the opportunity, they will help us see what we have forgotten to see: that creation is brimming full with wonder and glory, and that even the smallest creature is resplendent with God's majesty and awe. They help us see that acts of kindness to others are as natural as taking a breath, and that play is our most normal human state. Children will help us become holy, should we let them. They will teach us to love, and they will help us remember how deeply we are loved too.

If that's what we might see in them through the life of the church, what do you suppose they see in us?

When I think back to my own childhood, going to church and visiting my grandmother's house seemed to have the same fundamental rule: be invisible. By and large, I was afraid of my grandmother. I never heard her shout. She never once raised a hand against me. In fact, it didn't take me too many years of life to stand as tall as she did with her diminutive frame. Yet my grandmother filled me with dread.



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As a child, my grandmother's house was a wonder, yet one that was always out of bounds. It was four floors high, with a cellar below that I never did dare to descend into. The reason for that was partly because I was convinced, as the 25th or so of her grandchildren, that the cellar was where she kept the remains of my various cousins who had dared to disobey her over the years. It was also because in my grandmother's house, most of the 30 or so rooms were out of bounds for little boys. Every once in a while, I would catch a glimpse into one of them and steal a vision of fine furniture, or a grand piano in the corner, or paintings that the young could barely look at, let alone breathe near.

Her home was to me like a small palace of glory and mystery; a museum of sorts with trinkets from my missionary great-grandparents in China and collection pieces from my eccentric great-Aunts' assortment of knickknacks from Victorian Britain. That line from the letter to the Hebrews we heard this morning might have well have been emblazoned on the doorframe of the front door: *'You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire'*.



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As much as I loved to go, and especially to sing in the church choir, church was similarly an out of bounds place, with endless fascinating objects from which I had to keep my distance and to me the adults who were busy being religious often felt the same.

In many ways, we know that this picture of distance isn't true of All Saints'. Just attend Kanuga one year and watch hundreds of children and youth roam freely and happily the wilds of camp and you'll see that the children and youth of this parish have found in us a community where they know they can belong. Similarly, swing by church on a Wednesday night and see our own resident magician, Karol Kimmell, keeps three choirs in line *and* their parents on time. Here at All Saints' children play in waterslides and learn to spit watermelon seeds, they hike mountains and camp on islands, they sing, and pray, and learn from teachers who love the old, old stories of scripture, but love them even more. And that is so good, and holy, and right. But imagine if there could be more.





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Imagine not just these fine Sunday school teachers, whom we bless today, speaking of God with wonder and grace, but each of us, helping the younger in our midst lead 'very good lives' because we each have taken it as our vocation to be the spiritual village that raises these children. There is no special qualification needed, no expertise to be attained, just the honest to God commitment we make to one another in baptism that we will uphold one another in faith and help one another grow into the full stature of Christ. Today as we bless Sunday school teachers to walk on a path with our children and youth in this place, you and I are gifted the opportunity to join them on that journey, to be fellow travelers, to wonder with them where God is to be found, and how goodness is to be given.

Our lives have their origins in a blazing fire, an unspeakable glory, that in the rush and tumult of the world outside is so easy to forget. Yet we can give thanks that here we are, in this church that is the spiritual home to so many children and youth, and that through them we are among so many gifts of the Holy Spirit that will teach us how to live the most 'very good lives' our hearts are capable of.



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May we be a community for all the ages of saints who find life on this block. Let us be the village that finds the blazing love of Christ in all the beloved people of God, one body, young and old, gifted with grace.