



RETURN TO WHO YOU ARE SERIES

THE FIRE THIS TIME

JANUARY 4 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

Everyone being all cozy and tucked in today. Reminds me of once being on a bus in New York City going down Lexington Avenue. It was raining. Now, when it's raining, New Yorkers operate in a bit of a different mode. They somehow wield umbrellas carefully in crowds, though the spindles and the spines of the contraptions wobble and turn in the downpour. Through the swaths of people, collars up and hoods down over their heads, New Yorkers activate their rain scents to somehow protect one another. And the pair on my bus that I saw was no different. A mother and a son in the back of the bus waited for their stop in the mid 50s on the east side, her in her suit, and him in a little uniform with a tie bound surely for one of those academies on the east side where all the seven-year-olds tie their own ties.

They pressed the yellow strip to open the back doors. The wash of sound of rain hitting pavement and the bus roof followed the beep of the opening door notification. They stepped over a gully between the bus and the curb lighted on the sidewalk and mom popped her umbrella open, her collar up and looked left downtown to be sure it was safe to continue. And son looked down to his right under his hood to be sure his footing and his rain boots was sound. And gazing in opposite directions here, I watched as her right hand and his left hand met perfectly for her to guide him safely where they needed to go. No fumbling, no searching in the air. Their bodies knew the point in space under the rain unsighted and drenched where the hand they needed to hold would be, and they found it.

I tell you this story because I don't want to mince words on this important day. When we consider what we want to let go of together, what into the fire we'll cast today. Because someone should tell you today, if they haven't yet, that the most beautiful, the most breathlessly awe striking parts of each one of you are those parts you probably don't even think about. Like the miracle of a hand finding a hand without looking or without giving it a second thought. The tilt in your head when a young person

does something endearing, the smile when you catch an inside joke, helping right away when someone asks, sitting quietly ignoring what I'm saying so nicely, because maybe you're thinking about someone that you miss.

All of these and more should be seen and named before, before we think about what we will let go of today, what we wish to see rid from our lives, our ways, our manners today. The utter humanness of each of us is something to pause and to behold. I also say this because I don't know of a religion or a faith that exists here on earth with as many achievers, performers, and perfectionists in it as Unitarian Universalism. As your ministers, one of the things we hear is that yes, people love coming here, but they keep getting the message that they need to be doing something all the time.

All right. You know, we love you. I fear. I do. I fear sometimes that maybe our little form of purity, culture, sanctification maybe, or of being saved that exists in faiths where many of us have come from is a kind of social or societal contribution or effort score. As someone myself who just purchased a car with a combustion engine and a turbocharger, I have nightly said my 10 Hail Mary Olivers and three Our Father times, and so maybe I'm just preaching to myself today. As much as your ministers say it to you, hear it again. You're loved, really loved. You are enough, fully enough, and you are not alone. This church is with you.

We tell you all this because today we are going to take something and burn it. Winnow it away from us. It might be something we've tried to be free of before. It might be something new that troubles us. It might be an elected official. And I'm not taking sides, I'm just saying. There's plenty to go around. It might be the beginning of a foreign war. It could be a lot of things. What it can't be, though. What it can't be is that one thing you think will make you perfect. What it can't be is that one thing, if it would just go your way, would make you whole. It can't be anything that will make you more lovable. It can't be anything that will make you more beautiful even. Not because those things aren't allowed, because those things don't exist. There's no one thing that does that because the God of my understanding, the only God that makes sense to me already loves you exactly as you are, sees you as a whole being, and nothing will change that.

But what we can be rid of, what would help us all is what might be preventing us from helping others in our lives, in our world. Joy Harjo tells us in the reading that we will be drawn to the fires again and they're waiting. And her words are, "The guardians who have known you before time, who sit there, who will be there after time, they sit before the fire that has been there without time. When you find your way to the circle to the fire kept burning by these keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed. Cut the ties you have to failure and shame." And that's what I'm talking about, guys. The idea that there is one thing in us, if we can just let go of it'll make us whole is only a form of failure, a form, a shadow, of shame, and it ain't helping anybody. Right.

And in the end, she, the great poet, walks us hand in hand through this process. And I offer to you, as an aside, that taking the time perhaps each morning to read this poem or others like it to yourself aloud might be something we could all consider this year if we are looking for a resolution still. Because in the end, she marks why we, why any of us are doing any of this at all. It's not to be perfect

or to be loved. Our guardians and ancestors, your church is doing that already. She says, I quote, "Then you must do this. Help the next person find their way through the dark."

When I hear this direction, there are so many ways I am grateful to those who showed me a way of clarity and understanding rather than of clouded confusion, who took my hand in the rain and led me on. As around us, reality, reality of different kinds, phrase, as truth slips its reigns at times, or we awaken to truths previously unimaginable as compassion and understanding yield to combative misinformation. It is hard to stay focused on the purpose of our lives sometimes at all. But most of us can agree. And I think people of all beliefs and stripes of good fortune and good heart agree that we can find a common ground on the goal of making life better for the children coming after us and for those suffering needlessly in this world, and in particular, in the wars of warring adults who are vying for power and religious superiority around the world, not to mention superiority of fossil fuels around the world.

One of the finest searing examples of a person speaking truth to a child and to power at the same time is in James Baldwin's work, *The Fire Next Time*. A significant portion of this book is dedicated to his 14-year-old nephew. In the essay, he tells it like it is over and over, and in one important moment shares this with his nephew. "The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do, cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear." Right? Baldwin's clarity when reducing complex systems to the ways they impact individuals is one of the great and shining geniuses he has and shares with the world. And the very specific topic he's talking about, about the ways that white people see and treat people who are not white in the United States remains a woefully present peril today in the country, in this city, in our midst as we try and try to build this beloved community.

The warning that he shares is one to those who in their own peril fail to see the full humanity in those in their community. The change in the world needed and wanted and begged for by those under fire, under pressure around the world and here at home that would come from seeing the true humanity in others would be enormous. And I think many of us know that. And so today, today we consider the humanity of one very close to each of us, ourselves.

On this day, we hold a symbol of just one thing. Just one way we might ourselves be more human. Or through the lens of James Baldwin, be less inhuman. The title of Baldwin's book, *The Fire Next Time*, comes from a song sung by persons enslaved in this country while enforced servitude. The lyric it comes from is, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, the fire next time."

This is an illusion I know to a form of judgment, in the form of fire or damnation, and to honor the original meaning of the song, it's right, proper to acknowledge that by its authors. But in this tradition, in our faith as a universalist people, we do not hold to, we do not preach, we don't wish upon any others the idea of an eternal place of punishment. For our forebears said often and in many different ways, we cannot believe in a perfect loving God who would its creations to hell, to the fire next time. But many of us, if not all of us have seen enough in this life, have lived perhaps ourselves through

unimaginable fear and through suffering at the hands of others or just at the hands of fate or even at the hands of our own bodies, and I dare say our own minds to know that there is enough of hell in this world without worrying about how much of it there might be in the next.

And one of those forms of hell that Baldwin details us is to hold the belief that any other person on earth is less than human. That is a kind of bondage itself. Hear me people. But I tell you here that the root of that special hell is in a soil even more insidious, and that is the lurking notion or the unspoken fear that we, that you, that I might not be fully human. That some part of me, if others discovered it or revealed to the world it was, would mean that we could then be treated as less than human, as undeserving of being treated with dignity and respect. And that fear is a living hell, friends. It is the fire this time.

Joy Harjo talked about the people that despise you. Why? Because they despise themselves. And this causes us to build walls, to build structures externally as much as internally. To protect and defend ourselves is what we think, but it keeps others out, it keeps ourselves hidden rather than structures of welcome and wanting, practices that call each other in, not out, and show ourselves plainly and unashamed as we each approach the fires here where we will let go, where we will relinquish something and renew ourselves. That has a hold on us. Consider those things in us we fear will make us unworthy of love. We fear make us unwhole. We fear make us not enough, that bring us to the fire this time.

And when you do this, doubt not for an instant, that your neighbor, your friend, maybe your minister might also know the pain that you know, might have been where you have been and might also be working to be free of what you hold too. We are in this all together, friends. True peace, true peace, a peace that actually honors a God of love and justice is being exactly who you are in the presence of the divine. All of you.

It is the freedom that lights the way in the dark for the next person. It is the freedom that takes the hand of who is to come after us. It is the freedom that has always been there as the fires of our soul, of all of us have burned through eternity, the freedom that kindles these same fires today, the fire this time. May you know it well and so share your light with this world whose dimness so dearly needs it. May your choice today fire in you a new way of being, a new year of understanding, and a new path to love yourself as you love your neighbor. May it ever be so. Happy New Year. Blessed be, and Amen.