The Refiner, Not the Smiter

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On John in the Wilderness, the Brazen Serpent as Antivenom, and the Dove That Tears Heaven Open

The San Diego Dream

Let me begin with something I rarely begin with. *A dream. I am not a man who hangs his hat on every dream that anybody ever has, or even that I have. Dreams in my own experience usually mean I had a heavy dinner.* But this one stayed with me, and the more I sat with it across the week, the more I realized it had something to say to this chapter.

I dreamed this week that I was starting a church in San Diego. From my lips to God's ears, I know, but it was a dream. We were going to have our big inaugural service. The place was packed. All of you were there, scattered through the crowd, mixed in with a lot of people I did not know. And I wanted a real upbeat, happy, click-your-heels kind of message. The kind of opening sermon that a new church plant in a beautiful coastal city would deliver to a packed inaugural service. Pollyanna stuff. Have you read Pollyanna? She is the girl who tells the pastor who has been thundering fire-and-brimstone every Sunday that there are 365 happy texts in the Bible, one for every day of the year, and that he might consider mixing in a few. I had Pollyanna's pastor in mind. I was going to be the inverse of the thundering preacher. I was going to find a happy text and preach it to my packed San Diego inaugural service.

And I kept trying to focus my eyes on the text I was looking for. Have you ever been in a dream where you are trying to read something and you cannot get your eyes to focus? The whole time, I was saying, why can't I find Amos 5? Why can't I find Amos 5? And finally, after a long struggle and many pauses in the dream, the entire church emptied out, leaving only my wife with me. She always sticks with me to the bitter end, even in my dreams. And there I was, alone in an empty San Diego church plant, still looking for a happy text, and still trying to find Amos 5.

As soon as I woke up, I started laughing. Because Amos 5 is anything but a happy text. Amos 5 is the text where God tells Israel that they have been worshiping the wrong god for forty years in the wilderness without knowing it. Listen:

> I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? You also carried Sikkuth your king and Chiun, your idols, the star of your gods, which you made for yourselves. (Amos 5:21–26)

I hate your feast days. Take away from Me the noise of your songs. You think you were worshiping Me for forty years in the wilderness, but you were actually carrying around Sikkuth and Chiun, the star-gods you made for yourselves. That is what God is telling Israel through Amos. They had been singing the songs of deliverance through the Red Sea. They had been singing about receiving manna in the wilderness. They had been singing about the quail. And the songs were sincere, in the sense that they thought they were directed at Yahweh. But something was wrong in the motivation underneath the songs. Something was wrong in the heart of the

worship, such that God, looking on the same forty-year wilderness journey Israel thought they were doing with him, could say; you were not actually worshiping Me. You were worshiping a star-god you made for yourselves and called by My name.

That is some hard stuff, Lord. I am not going to a San Diego church plant and leading with that as my opening text. But here I am, on a Sunday morning, having woken up from the dream, recognizing that the text I could not focus on in the dream was exactly the text I needed to preach back home, to the assembly that already knows me, that has been walking with me for years, that I do not have to soften the message for because we have already done the softening together.

And Stephen quotes exactly this passage from Amos when he stands before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, just before Saul of Tarsus authorizes his stoning (Acts 7:42–43). Stephen invokes Amos 5 against the very temple establishment that thought it was worshiping correctly. The hard text travels forward into the New Testament as a continuing diagnostic for any community that has confused its own preferred ceremonies with the actual worship of the living God.

The Refiner

And so the title that surfaces, when I think about how to land this chapter, is the Refiner. Not the smiter. The Refiner. Because what we sometimes think is judgment, what we sometimes mistake as the heavy hand, turns out, when we read the Scriptures carefully, to be the patient work of a Refiner who is purifying what he loves rather than destroying what he has rejected.

That is the central distinction of this chapter. Are we serving the great Smiter or the great Refiner? Because the picture we hold of God determines almost everything about how we then live in front of him. The community that serves the great Smiter spends most of its energy trying

to stay out of his line of sight. The community that serves the great Refiner walks into the fire willingly, knowing that the heat is for purification rather than for destruction. And the difference between the two communities is not principally in their doctrinal statements. It is in their interior posture toward the God they say they serve.

Listen to what Malachi 3 says about the One who is coming:

> "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness." (Malachi 3:1–3)

He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver. That is the activity Malachi anticipates from the coming One. Not principally the activity of destruction. The activity of purification. Sitting patiently next to the furnace. Watching the dross rise to the surface. Skimming it off. Bringing the silver gradually to the state of pure reflection of the refiner's own face. That is what the Refiner does. And that is what the One John would later baptize was coming to do.

John in the Wilderness

And Matthew 3 opens with John the Baptist doing exactly the work Malachi 3 had anticipated. John comes out of polite society in Jerusalem, where the religious elite are making their sacrifices, where they are working in concert with the Roman Empire to keep some relative peace, where they are opening the Torah every week and singing the songs and making the

offerings, and John leaves all of that and goes out into the wilderness. He goes to the Jordan River. He begins to baptize. And his message is:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2).

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. I am not the kind of preacher who can look into your soul and tell you precisely what you need to repent of. Most of the time I deceive myself about my own need for repentance, let alone yours. We are usually doing a little worse than we think we are. And those of us with sensitive consciences are sometimes doing a little better than we think we are. We bring out the cat-o'-nine-tails over missteps that the Father has already forgiven and forgotten, while the missteps he actually wants us to address remain in our blind spots. Repentance is a longer, more honest, more interior work than we usually let it be.

And Matthew anchors John's wilderness ministry in Isaiah 40:

"For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.'" (Matthew 3:3, quoting Isaiah 40:3).

Isaiah 40 is one of the most pastorally powerful chapters in the entire Old Testament. It opens with the great words: Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. Speak comfortingly to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned (Isaiah 40:1–2). Isaiah is speaking to a people in Babylonian captivity: a thousand miles from their promised land, exiled from their temple, separated from everything that was good and promised by God, with a massive desert wilderness between them and home. And God is speaking, through Isaiah, into the impossibility of their situation.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and

hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth.’ (Isaiah 40:3–4)

Every valley exalted. Every mountain brought low. Crooked places made straight. Rough places smoothed. That is the refining work of God in concrete imagery. He balances out our condition as human beings so that we can walk in this world on a straight path. Are you low? God will raise you up. Are you high? God will bring you down. That is the refining work: the leveling, the equalizing, the bringing-of-all-of-it-into-straight-line-with-the-purposes-of-God.

And the path through the wilderness is impossible by the surrounding world’s standards. A thousand miles. Hostile terrain. Limited water. No clear path. But God is announcing, through Isaiah and now through John, that he is making a highway through the very impossibility that the exiles thought was permanent. The Rock that gave water in the wilderness was Christ, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:4. Wherever the people of God are walking through impossibility, that same Rock is following them, gushing the water that sustains the journey. We have a spring of water available to us when the heat is too much and the path is too rough: the same spring that fed Israel under Moses, available now to whoever is making the journey through their own particular wilderness.

Brood of Vipers

And then the Pharisees and Sadducees come out to see what is happening. The power-brokers of Jerusalem. The religious establishment with their nicely-tuned synagogue gig. They come out to inspect. And John’s response is striking:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” (Matthew 3:7).

Brood of vipers. Snakes. And we should pause on why John uses this specific image, because it goes back to Genesis 3 in a way that matters for the rest of the chapter. What is a snake known for in the Old Testament Scriptures? Speaking disparaging words about God. That is the original serpent-activity. In Genesis 3, the serpent's first act is to speak about God in a way that questions God's goodness, "Has God really said? You will not surely die. God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened." The serpent does not attack the woman with violence. The serpent talks. The serpent's weapon is speech that recasts God as untrustworthy.

And what John is identifying in the Pharisees and Sadducees is exactly this same speech-pattern, scaled up into a religious-establishment form. They had been the official teachers of God's word to Israel. They had positioned themselves as God's voice in the land. But their teaching had drifted into a speech-pattern that misrepresented God to the people: making him a god of ceremonial precision rather than a god of justice, righteousness, and mercy. Making him a god whose tribal favoritism could be relied on rather than a god who would call his own people to account when they oppressed the vulnerable. Their speech-about-God had become serpent-speech, in the precise Genesis 3 sense. And John identifies them with the snake-family they had been imitating.

And here is what John does not assume. He does not assume that the wrath he is announcing is going to fall on innocent people who just sometimes get things wrong. Listen, do not ever think that the wrath of God is going to be poured out on some innocent person who just did not always get it right but was generally a good person. That is not how the wrath of God works. The wrath of God falls on confirmed oppressors who will not repent, who will not bring forth fruit worthy of repentance, but who only want to control. That is who the brood-of-vipers

warning is aimed at. Repenters get refined. Oppressors who will not repent meet the ax that John says is laid to the root of the tree (Matthew 3:10).

God Covers What He Could Have Killed

And the diagnostic for what kind of God we are dealing with goes back to Genesis 3 itself. *Watch what God actually does in the moment of the first human sin.*

God had warned the human couple in Genesis 2:17, in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die. And they ate. And they did not die. Not on the day. Not in the immediate sense the warning seemed to promise. Now, the great Smiter would have executed the sentence immediately. He would have killed them on the spot and started over with a new Adam and Eve; let us call them Mary and Steve. But that is not what happened. God did not kill them. He covered them. He clothed them with garments he made himself, sacrificing an animal in order to do it, and he sent them out of the garden with provisions for the world they were about to enter (Genesis 3:21). Grace was already operating in Eden before the gate closed behind them.

And then watch what God does with Cain. Cain has just murdered his brother Abel. Cain is, by any standard, a confirmed killer, guilty of the first homicide in human history. And Cain says, my punishment is greater than I can bear. When someone finds me out there in the wilderness, they will kill me because of what I have done (Genesis 4:13–14). And God's response?

"And the Lord said to him, 'Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.' And the Lord set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him" (Genesis 4:15).

The mark of Cain was protective, not punitive. We have, for years, talked about the mark of Cain as if it were the judgment of God on the murderer's forehead, a brand identifying him as

accursed. But the text says exactly the opposite. The mark was put on Cain to keep anyone who found him from killing him. Even after the homicide. Even with the murder still warm. The God of Genesis protects the very man who has just killed his brother, by placing on him a visible mark of divine ownership. That is the God we are dealing with. He loves to redeem the worst among us. The Cains among us, God wants to refine and protect rather than destroy.

The Brazen Serpent

And the central image of how the Refiner operates against the serpent's speech comes in Numbers 21. Israel is in the wilderness. They have been there for years. And they begin to complain: disparaging God, accusing him of forgetting them, accusing him of unfaithfulness to his covenant promise. And the serpents appear:

> So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:6–9)

Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. Everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live. That is the central image. The serpents that are killing the people become the visual form of the remedy. The remedy is shaped like the disease. Moses fashions a bronze serpent, in the image of what is killing them, and lifts it up where everyone can see it. And the looking becomes the cure.

And John the Baptist, out in the wilderness in Matthew 3, has Numbers 21 in his mind. He is preparing the way for the One who will himself become the lifted-up serpent that draws all eyes to himself. Jesus makes the connection explicit in John 3:

> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:14–16)

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. And then comes John 3:16, the most famous verse in the Bible, directly connecting the brazen-serpent typology to the cross. But do you know what the very next verse says?

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17).

God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. That is the Refiner, not the Smiter. The lifting-up of the Son of Man on the cross is not the great Smiter's last act of vengeance. It is the great Refiner's central act of healing: the remedy fashioned in the shape of the disease, lifted up so that all who look may live.

The Antivenom

And let me bring in an illustration that a brother in our assembly offered while I was preaching this. It is one of the most striking parallels I have ever heard to what the brazen serpent typology is actually doing.

In the late 1800s, a French physician named Pierre Calmette, working with Louis Pasteur, developed the world's first antivenom for snake-bite. Calmette was working in India and discovered that certain horses and rabbits had survived snake-bites that should have killed them.

Their bodies had developed something that resisted the poison. And Calmette discovered that if he drew blood from these wounded survivors and injected the blood-serum into a human being who had just been bitten, the human would live. The wounded animals had developed antibodies through their survival of the venom. And those antibodies, transferred into a newly-bitten human, neutralized the venom that would otherwise have killed.

Now hold the structure of what Calmette had discovered. The remedy was drawn from the wounded. The animal that had survived the bite (that was lame, that walked with a limp, that was no longer as strong as the unbitten animals) was the very animal whose blood now carried the cure for the newly bitten. Wounded creatures carry medicine inside them that the un-wounded cannot supply.

And that is exactly the typology of the cross. Jesus is wounded. He is bitten by every poison the human race has been bitten by: sin, death, separation, suffering, betrayal, abandonment. He absorbs the full venom of the human condition in his own body on the cross. And in absorbing it, he develops, if we may say so, the antibodies that no un-wounded human could carry. And then his wounded blood becomes the remedy for everyone bitten. We do not look to an un-wounded Christ for salvation. We look to a wounded Christ, to the One whose hands and feet and side carry the marks of having survived what was killing us. And the looking, the believing, is the receiving of his antibodies into our own bloodstream.

Jacob was wounded in his hip-socket at Peniel. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life. But he survived the encounter with God, and the limp became the visible sign that he had been with the One who could either kill him or bless him, and had chosen to bless (Genesis 32:24–32). Jacob’s wound made him a different kind of patriarch than he would have been

without it. And the wound, far from disqualifying him, was the very thing that made his ongoing testimony credible to everyone who watched him walk afterward.

And the same is true for every one of us who has been wounded by life and brought through to the far side. Whatever you have been crushed by (finances, upbringing, abuse, depression, anxiety, addiction, pornography, alcohol, the slow grinding-down of disappointment) once you have received the antivenom of the wounded Christ into your own bloodstream, you now carry the antibodies that the un-wounded around you do not have. You can help other people. Your wound becomes the credential for your ministry to the next person bitten by the same poison. That is one of the deep secrets of the kingdom's economy. The Father refines us through the very things that nearly killed us, and then commissions us to administer the antivenom to whoever crosses our path next.

The Counter-Warning From Hezekiah

And the brother's illustration also raised a counter-warning that I want to make explicit, because it is one of the most striking textual moves in the entire Old Testament. The brazen serpent that Moses fashioned in Numbers 21, the one that healed the bitten Israelites by being lifted up and gazed upon, was preserved by Israel as a sacred artifact for several hundred years. Israel carried it with them through the wilderness and into the promised land. They kept it as a memorial. And then, eventually, the people began to worship the bronze serpent itself. They made offerings to it. They burned incense before it. They turned the means of healing into an idol.

And King Hezekiah, several centuries later, did something striking:

> He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan. (2 Kings 18:4)

Hezekiah broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made. Because the people had started worshiping the staff and the bronze, not realizing that the power had never been in the serpent-image itself but in the God who used the image as a means of healing. And Hezekiah, in his reforms, destroys the very artifact that had once saved his ancestors, because the artifact had been turned into a substitute for the God it was supposed to point toward.

And the application to contemporary Christianity is direct. We can take the very means of God's grace (the cross, the church, the sacraments, the practices we have used to receive the kingdom) and we can turn them into idols. We can start drawing power from our affiliation with our church rather than from the God who works through the church. We can start drawing identity from our denominational tradition rather than from the Christ the tradition was meant to point toward. And when that happens, Hezekiah-style reform may be required. The artifact may need to be broken to bits, not because the artifact was originally wrong, but because the artifact has stopped pointing beyond itself.

We try to draw power from our affiliations. Our team won the Super Bowl, what did you do? You did not actually do anything. You did not contribute to the victory. The affiliation gives the illusion of derivative participation in someone else's accomplishment. And we do exactly the same thing religiously. We affiliate ourselves with traditions whose accomplishments we did not contribute to, and we draw an illusory power from the affiliation rather than from the actual Source the tradition was meant to connect us to. Hezekiah's hammer is sometimes necessary.

Children From Stones

And back to John in the wilderness. After he calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers, he says something that should level every claim to inherited religious privilege:

"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matthew 3:8–9).

Do not think you can say to yourselves; we have Abraham as our father. God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones. And the Greek text contains a wordplay that does not survive in English. The Aramaic word for stones (ʾabnayyā) and the Aramaic word for children (benayyāʾ) are nearly homophones. John is making a pun, a witty rhetorical move that the Aramaic-speaking crowd would have caught immediately. "You think you have a special claim because of your physical descent from Abraham, but God can produce sons of Abraham from these very stones lying at our feet."

And the deeper substance of John's warning is that the Abrahamic covenant was never principally about ethnic descent. The promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 was, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. The blessing was supposed to flow out from Abraham's line to every nation. The Pharisees and Sadducees had reduced the covenant to a tribal privilege. John reminds them that the covenant was always meant to be global, and that the God who made the covenant can produce its heirs from any material he chooses, including the stones at the edge of the Jordan.

We can put confidence in our genealogy: spiritual or natural. We can put confidence in our nation: bless God, America. We can put confidence in our denominational tradition or our family heritage. And every one of those confidences is exactly the kind of confidence John is

warning against. God is able to raise up children of Abraham from stones. The inheritance has never been about which family or nation or tradition you were born into. The inheritance has always been about whether you have been refined into a child of Abraham's faith, which is faith in the God who can produce sons from stones.

Mightier Than I

And John points beyond himself:

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11).

Whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. According to rabbinic tradition, a rabbi could never ask one of his students to untie his sandals; it was considered too degrading a task even for a disciple. John's expression of unworthiness is therefore not casual humility. It is the recognition that the One coming is so radically beyond him in dignity that even the disciple-tasks the rabbinic tradition would not permit are still beyond what John is worthy to perform for him.

And the One coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. We sometimes want to read this as a divided sentence: the Holy Spirit for the good people, the fire for the bad people. As if Jesus brings the Spirit to his disciples and the fire to his enemies. But the Greek text presents these as a single conjoined phrase, Holy Spirit and fire, and the Old Testament consistently uses both images for the same purification process. God sends his breath. God sends his fire. Both are instruments by which the Refiner does his work. And the work is the resuscitation, renewal, and restoration of what he loves, not the destruction of what he hates.

Fulfill All Righteousness

And then Jesus appears. And he comes to John for baptism. John resists:

> And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:14–15)

To fulfill all righteousness. That word fulfill recurs throughout Matthew's Gospel as a technical term, Matthew uses it again and again to mark the moments where Old Testament expectation is being satisfied by the ministry of Jesus. Out of Egypt have I called My Son: fulfilled. Rachel weeping for her children: fulfilled. He shall be called a Nazarene: fulfilled. And now Jesus's submission to John's baptism is identified as fulfillment of all righteousness. Jesus is enacting, in his own body, the entire pattern of Israel's deliverance, and the baptism is the way the pattern gets formally inaugurated for him personally.

And listen to Psalm 72, the great Messianic Psalm that anticipates exactly this fulfillment:

> Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the king's Son. He will judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice . . . For He will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy. He will redeem their life from oppression and violence; and precious shall be their blood in His sight. (Psalm 72:1–2, 12–14)

He will judge the poor with justice. He will deliver the needy when he cries. He will redeem their life from oppression and violence. Precious shall be their blood in His sight. That is the justice of God in concrete description. Not the justice of get-what-you-deserve. Nobody actually wants get-what-you-deserve justice, not when we look honestly at our own account. The justice of God is the justice that brings well-being to the people, vindicates the afflicted, helps the poor, and crushes the head of the oppressor. And the crushing of the oppressor's head is itself

part of the deliverance, because the oppressed need their oppressor's power broken before their well-being can be restored.

Are you afflicted? He vindicates the afflicted. Are you bound by chains? Some of us are bound by seven chains, and we do not know how we will get out of them. He delivers the bound. Are you the oppressor, at least sometimes, in your own household, in your own workplace, in your own relationships? We are all oppressors at one time or another. We are all the afflicted at one time or another. We are all broken and breakers. We all do these things. We wag our finger at the great dragon out there on the global scale, and we have a little serpent right here at home that needs to have its head crushed too. And God means to crush the serpent in us, by the Refiner's slow work, not by the Smiter's quick blow.

The Personal Pentecost

And then Jesus comes up out of the water. And what happens next is one of the most extraordinary moments in the entire Bible:

> When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16–17)

The heavens were opened. Same phrase Isaiah uses in Isaiah 64:1: "Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down!" Same phrase Ezekiel uses in Ezekiel 1:1, "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God." Isaiah had cried out for God to tear heaven open and come down and deliver his people. Ezekiel had seen the heavens torn open as the prophetic vision of the divine chariot-throne began. And now, at the Jordan, the heavens are torn

open again, and what descends is not principally a vision of judgment but the Spirit of God in the form of a dove.

And the dove is critical. Why a dove? Why not an eagle, or a hawk, or some other bird that would carry the imagery of strength? Because the dove is the bird of new creation.

Think of Noah after the flood. The world had been covered with chaotic waters, exactly like the deep at the beginning of Genesis. And Noah had sent out a dove. The dove came back the first time. The second time, it returned with an olive leaf in its mouth, the first sign of new creation emerging from the flood-waters. The third time, the dove did not return, because it had found a place of new creation to dwell in (Genesis 8:8–12). The dove is the herald of new creation arising from the chaotic waters.

And going back even further, to Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. The Hebrew verb (merachefet) carries the sense of fluttering, brooding, like a bird hovering protectively over its nest. The biblical writers chose the imagery of a bird to describe the Spirit's presence at the original creation. And the dove that descends on Jesus at his baptism is the same Spirit hovering over the same kind of waters: except now the waters are baptismal rather than chaotic, and the creation that is about to emerge is the new creation through Jesus rather than the old creation from Genesis.

Jesus, coming up out of the baptismal waters, is the first sprig of new creation rising from the chaotic deep. He is the new Adam. He is the new Israel-reduced-to-One. He is the inaugurating moment of the new heavens and new earth that John will later see in Revelation 21–22. Old things are passing away. Behold, all things are becoming new (2 Corinthians 5:17). And the same dove that hovered over the original waters now hovers over the new creation, and over every one of us who has shared in his baptism through faith.

This was Jesus's personal Pentecost. He had been conceived of the Holy Spirit, per Matthew 1 and Luke 1–2. But this is the moment of his commissioning by the Spirit: the moment where the Spirit descends on him in a public, audible, visible way that authorizes him to go out from the wilderness and begin to administer the kingdom-ministry he was sent for. It is the personal-Pentecost moment of the One who will later, after his ascension, pour out his own Spirit on the corporate assembly in Acts 2. Same Spirit. Same descent-pattern. First administered to the Head, then administered through the Head to the Body.

The Return of Glory

And here is what is significant about the heavens being torn open at the Jordan. Ezekiel had documented, across the first eleven chapters of his book, the gradual departure of God's glory from the Jerusalem temple. The presence first moved out of the Holy of Holies. Then out of the outer courts. Then out of the temple gate. Then out of the city gate. Then to the Mount of Olives. And then finally out to the exiles in Babylon (Ezekiel 1–11). The glory had left Israel. And the Old Testament closes, four hundred years later, with the glory still absent.

But here at the Jordan, the heavens are torn open again, and the Spirit descends again, and the voice speaks again. The glory is returning. Not to the temple, where the religious establishment is going about its business. To the wilderness, where the Refiner is doing his work on those who have come out to be baptized for repentance. The center of God's activity has relocated to the margins. And those who would meet the returning glory have to come out of polite religious society to find it.

That is the structural pattern that has not changed. The center of God's activity is still on the margins of human society, not in the power-places, not in the religious establishments, not in the centers of cultural prestige. Out there in the wilderness, where the John-the-Baptist-figures

are baptizing in the river, the Refiner is meeting the people who have come out to be refined. And what we build there in our wilderness encampments, what we allow the Father to do to us out on the margins, is then carried back, eventually, into the centers of power. We speak truth to power from the wilderness side of our experience, not from inside the power-centers we were tempted to assimilate to. And the truth-telling, when it is rooted in actual wilderness-formation, has a power the power-centers cannot replicate.

The Word of Power in Our Mouth

And what comes out of every person who receives the Spirit, in Luke's careful narration, is *speech*. *Watch the pattern*:

Zechariah, in the temple, refuses to believe the angel's announcement about John the Baptist's birth, and his speech is taken away. He is mute for nine months (Luke 1:20). And on the eighth day after John's birth, when Zechariah writes "his name is John" on the tablet, the Spirit comes upon him and he is immediately filled with the Spirit and begins to prophesy (Luke 1:64, 67). Speech restored by the Spirit's coming.

When Mary enters Elizabeth's home, Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit and prophesies (Luke 1:41–45). And then Mary herself, also filled with the Spirit, sings the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). Spirit comes, speech follows.

The angels announce the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in song. The shepherds run to Bethlehem and then go out telling everyone what they have seen and heard (Luke 2:8–20). Simeon prophesies over the infant Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:29–32). Anna the prophetess speaks to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel (Luke 2:38). Spirit comes, speech follows.

And then at Pentecost, Jesus's promise to his disciples kept:

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

And they sat there in the upper room for ten days, praying. And then the heavens opened. The rushing mighty wind filled the whole house. Cloven tongues like fire, the Refiner’s fire, sat on each of them. And they began to speak. In the languages of all the peoples gathered in Jerusalem from every nation of the known world. And what they spoke, Acts 2:11 tells us, was the wonderful works of God: the glorifying speech that the people heard, miraculously, in their own native tongues (Acts 2:1–11).

Pentecost is the Refiner’s fire becoming the disciples’ own speech. They had been mute about the kingdom for various reasons: fear, confusion, lack of authorization. The Spirit came and the muteness was dissolved. And the speech that came out was the same kingdom-speech Jesus had been speaking, now multiplied across as many languages as the surrounding world spoke.

And we have to speak the language of the people. If our language becomes too biblicized, too constrained by some sort of high religious culture, we will miss the very people who need the kingdom-speech the most. We are not principally speaking in tongues, at least not in the ecstatic-utterance sense. But we are speaking in tongues every time we speak into the hearts of people whose native language is not the language of the religious tradition we were raised in. The Spirit specializes in this kind of translation work. He produces speech that crosses cultural lines, language lines, generational lines, class lines. He makes the kingdom hearable in whatever vocabulary the next person is most fluent in. Let us be that kind of speakers. Filled with the

Spirit. Translating the kingdom into the language of every neighbor who comes within hearing range.

Where the Journey Is Headed

And the chapter ends with the journey that is just beginning. In Matthew 4, Jesus goes from the baptismal waters straight into the wilderness: forty days of testing, paralleling Israel's forty years. Every verse he uses to combat the devil's claims comes from the Exodus wilderness narratives. Deuteronomy 6 and 8, the very texts where Moses had told Israel how the wilderness was meant to form them. Jesus is the new Israel succeeding where the original Israel had failed.

And then in Matthew 5, having come out of the wilderness in the power of the Spirit, he goes up to a mountain, like Moses on Sinai, and begins to deliver the Sermon on the Mount. He is the new Moses, but with one critical difference: where Moses had brought down tables of stone with the law written on them, Jesus speaks the law directly out of his own being. And his speech goes further than Moses's. "You have heard it said, but I say to you." Murder is in the anger before it becomes the act. Adultery is in the look before it becomes the deed. The law goes inside, where only the Refiner can address it.

We are on a journey through Matthew's Gospel. And the journey forward is by gazing on Jesus. Looking at him. Soaking in him. Letting his words and his presence do their slow refining work. He is the One. He is the Refiner. He is the perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). And the looking, the gazing on the lifted-up Son of Man whose wounded blood carries the antibodies of new creation, is the path forward. Out of the wilderness. Through the testing. Up to the mountain. Into the kingdom. By a single act of trust, repeated daily across the long arc of a lifetime, until the dove that descended on him at the Jordan has hovered long enough over us that we, too, have become new creation: old things passed away, all things become new. Amen.