

The Rev. Jennifer Adams
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There's a movie called *Cry Freedom* which is about the life of Steven Biko a South African, anti-apartheid activist in the 60's and 70's. And while Biko is not formally acknowledged on the Church calendar, in this movie there's a scene that captures something very powerful about the life of a saint. The scene takes place around Biko's funeral and the images that fill the screen tell the story of the very real loss of a very real human being. There is a casket and a family in mourning. There are memories shared, a service is celebrated, and just like at most funerals, a burial place is prepared. One of focus points in this scene is on the human context of this individual – the personal sacrifice, and struggle and fight that was Steven Biko and the all of the emotion surrounding his death. People weep and are wounded in this scene and there is palpable wide-spread mourning over the loss of this man. But the scene is also bigger than that because it also shows that upon news of Biko's death the streets filled with people chanting and singing and as the camera pans the surrounding countryside it becomes clear that the hearts that grieved this loss were also very much alive with the vision of freedom for which Biko fought. Through miracles of inspiration and action, the streets were filled with people who believed that life could be different and so as they mourned, they also demanded justice. Even as the sadness and anger around Biko's death filled this movie-- it also revealed that his life-giving vision would live on. It would live on because it had been embodied by an entire people who would over the decades work to make freedom come. Today, Biko is remembered and celebrated as one of the sparks that led to the eventual crumbling of the system of apartheid.

This is what saints do. “In the time of their visitation,” borrowing beautiful words from the first reading, “they shine forth, and run like sparks through the stubble.” Isn't that a wonderful image? Saints are those who run like sparks through the stubble that is life. They are “tested by God like gold in the furnace,” the passage says. And that piece is something to which we can all relate; there is something universally human about experiencing the furnaces of life. While the extent of our experience varies in part on privilege, nobody is exempt from the challenges that life brings. We know the heat whether it be through experiences of personal loss or illness or injustice or any of the many other shapes in which suffering comes.

So maybe what's unique about the saints isn't the furnace itself, it's that they're able to use the fire of the furnace to ignite something new. With God they redeem the heat and spark something bold, something that does not simply burn people out, but leads to new life. Sainthood is Biko who in the furnace of apartheid used its heat to start a fire for freedom. Sainthood is Francis who stepped into the furnace of poverty and sparked an awareness of the need to care for one another and all the beings of creation. Sainthood is Mary who accepted the furnace of family rejection and turmoil in order to birth the spark (with a capitol “S”), in order to birth the light of the world. Saints know the furnaces that are life's challenges as well as any of us. But through the miracle that that is some sort of holy teamwork with God, they tap into the heat and spread a fire that is merciful and loving and freedom-giving and hope-filled.

And so on All Saints day we remember and celebrate the sparks that have offered themselves throughout the history of the Church. But we also ask ourselves how we will bring new light to this little corner of God's world. As we baptize and welcome newcomers to Grace Church today, we ask what gifts we have to help us shine in the stubble. What furnaces do we see that demand our attention, our presence, our compassion, maybe even our fight?

While there is not apartheid in our country, it's certainly not free of injustice, or poverty, or our own versions of persecution. Artist Peter Gabriel in his song *Biko* describes the effects of the saints like this, "You can blow out a candle but you can't blow out a fire. Once the flames begin to catch, the wind will blow it higher." We've all been given a light to shine, and as baptism reminds us, together we actually embody the Light of the world, the Light that is new life. Our job is to fan the flames, to be the flames that lead to justice, mercy and peace for all.

As we spark, may the wind catch us and blow us higher.

Amen