

2015

Blaze

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Recommended Citation

Christie, Luke (2015) "Blaze," *The Echo*: Vol. 2015, Article 37.

Available at: <http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/echo/vol2015/iss2015/37>

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Acknowledgements

2015 Fiction Editor's Choice Award Winner

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Winner of Editor's Choice Award

fiction

It was like Sodom and Gomorrah. A whole county laid to waste because of the sins of a faithless people. Surely, it was the work of the Devil but just as surely it was God's work too because sometimes He lets the Devil run wild among folks who rightly deserve it, among those who have forgotten that a God and a Devil even exist and that the only reason the Devil doesn't obliterate every single one of their snarling, sniveling faces is because the God is more powerful and loves his imperfect human creatures more than any of them love each other. Even more than they love themselves, which is really saying something, seeing as all they ever do is stop and stare in front of mirrors, clothing themselves in vanity and satisfying the lust in their hearts and souls.

But even God gets fed up sometimes and then He says, Devil, just go on and commence for these people on Earth the suffering and damnation that awaits them in eternity. I've had it! You can have this lot. They're all yours. He promised Noah he would never destroy the world by flood again, but he said nothing about fire and, technically speaking, He could even use flood if He wanted to, because we're not talking about the whole world here. We're just talking about Blanchett County -- a wretched, forest-pocked few hundred acres of old plantation homes, termite-infested slave-shacks-turned-tenement-housing, and businesses of the usual sort: hardware store, general store, pharmacy... only one of each so that their greedy owners has a complete monopoly over his industry.

About the only establishments with any sort of competition are the churches, which is nothing but a sorry joke seeing as attendance last Sunday topped out at 36 and that many only showed up because of the fires. I don't presume to know exactly what they were searching for but if they wanted to hear that God would put out the flames and restore their homes and their riches, they left disappointed because they sure didn't hear it from me. I stood tall in the pulpit and declared that the only flames being put out were the ones in their hearts and

these they'd put out themselves. Oh God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He does not forsake those who fear Him. He giveth back tenfold and more to all who remain steadfast in their faith. But He casts into exile the ungrateful, the unfaithful, the disobedient. And He turns into pillars of salt those who look back.

These days, I'm focusing mostly on my children's sermons. Children understand things differently than adults. They look into the world like it's a crystal ball -- only they see past the swirling mist, past the thunder clouds and the coal smoke, into the simple truth beyond. Somehow, things like miracles and a debt so great it cannot be repaid, a grace so magnificent it has no earthly equal, make sense to them. It's as simple as two plus five equals 5,000. It's as easy as a verse written out on a paper bracelet or set to music, the tune even simpler than the words.

To a child, God can be like the grandparent who picks you up after you trip and skin your knees, whose touch is healing, whose voice is soothing. Or like the second grade teacher who gives you half of her own ham sandwich because Momma worked third shift last night and Daddy came home too drunk to fix your lunch. Or like the sparrow who leads you to a spring when you've been out tumbling in the grass and you tumble too far and you don't know where you are and suddenly you're thirsty and the saltiness of your tears is only making it worse. Ask a child how far away God is and they'll tell you He's just at the end of that chain made of white and purple construction paper links, or they'll scrunch a little hand over their tiny beating heart and say He's right here, inside, knocking. Ask a child to show you God and he'll pull out that cheap plastic mirror in the popsicle frame he painted in Sunday school, tell you to just look and you'll see God's reflection. Ask a child what she has to do to get into Heaven and she'll say Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and show you the picture she drew of two paths in a wood, one zig-zaggy and going every which way, the other straight and narrow with a gold star sticker at the end, "GOD" written next to it in sprawling crayon.

But then they grow up and all the wonder leaves their eyes. They turn into their parents, too smug or too greedy or too horny to keep from taking that apple from the tree. Their eyes become open to their nakedness but instead of covering themselves in shame, they expose themselves underneath bleachers and in pool house bathrooms, giving

into the same desires that resulted in their coming into the world in the first place.

The children are our last great hope. But they're also our last great tragedy. Try as I might, I can't seem to keep them in that place where candy necklaces and flag football in the cemetery are enough for this lifetime. If they would just keep making crosses out of clay and starting water fights when they're supposed to be washing each other's mud-caked feet, maybe they'd make it Home before the rivers turn to blood and the locusts descend. But like their older brothers and sisters and cousins, they trade their inquisitiveness of mind for an unquenchable curiosity of body.

So what more can be done besides pray for a better way and say good riddance? I guess that's how our species perpetuates itself. I guess that's why the front row always fills up when I call for all the children to come forward. And I guess, so long as the children keep coming down the aisles, there's a chance one of them can be saved from herself. So I keep focusing on my children's sermons. Because the adults, well, they've made their bed and now they have to sleep in it.

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The toilets are filthy. May He forgive me for using his name in vain, but God Almighty I've never seen so much left-behind human waste. Like the men had some sort of contest to see who could miss by the greatest margin and the women had never been shown by their mothers how to rinse out their soiled cloths and use them over again instead of leaving them behind in the garbage pail for every Betty and Susan to see.

My sister tells me they're making a disposable kind now and that's why they're suddenly showing up in every public bathroom from here to Texas. She says it's more sanitary but I don't see how. It seems wasteful to me, the extravagance of it all, going out and buying pads every month when you could just as soon save that nickel or, Heaven forbid, toss it in the collection plate on Sunday. Wasteful. Not to mention downright shameful, a woman airing her impurities out in the open like that.

Three Sundays ago, I preached about dispensing with such frivolities, telling folks that to really please Him, they needed to put a stop to their idolatry, give up all their Golden Calves—their store-bought clothes and their fancy motors. God made man to work the land, to

build for himself the roof he sleeps under, to sew for himself the clothes on his back, to plant and grow and harvest for himself the food he puts on his table. But not the men around here, drinking themselves silly in the taverns all up and down the square, each one betting the others he plays a better game of billiards... sleeping through the somber ringing of the church bells on Sunday mornings... stumbling onto the line ten minutes late, red-eyed and with a two-day's stubble making them look manic, rabid, like soon they'll start frothing at the mouth. And their wives doing the same thing, punching in and taking orders from men not their husbands, leaving their children to roll around naked in the streets. But then they tell me it's all worth it because now they have all sorts of useless gadgets in their houses and expensive sheets on their beds and their boys and girls wear collared shirts and dresses that come plastic-wrapped in the mail.

I fancied it a craze, figured the Devil would have his laugh soon when the factory owners and the bankers finally realized that they'd reaped from Blanchett County all there was to reap, packed up their machines and took their swindle elsewhere, leaving all these backwater folks with homes and clothes and country club memberships they can't afford. But then the Deacons came to me with a proposal for putting electric fans in the sanctuary and I thought, the money changers have come to the temple at last, and I knew I had to turn over their tables and throw them out, make them understand that God's house was no place for the flesh-satisfying commodities of this shattered world.

So I waited until the dead of August, and then I shut up all the windows so it would be hotter than Hell in the sanctuary and, come Sunday morning three weeks ago, I tore my robe from my breast and said with flaming lips, All ye who lust in your hearts after the fashions of this earth, fashions of sin and of sinful men... All ye who now keep your Sears catalog where you once set your Bible... Come forward, fall on your faces and lay that lust to rest in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen!

No one came forward. A gluttonous woman fainted, her blubbering body spilling into the aisle as she tumbled from the pew. A disgraceful man in a straw hat and suspenders shot up from the back row and called for my sacking. And this is how it goes. Once a Savior beloved by all but just as soon as He tries to do for the people what's best for them, they turn on Him and seek the company of criminals and harlots

instead. I could feel the sweat running down the inside of my legs just before a second suspended man hurdled over the front three pews and the passed-out whale woman and tackled me where I stood, grinding his knee into my groin as the stained glass blurred around me.

The floating, rust-colored ring looks like a firebrand. It wouldn't surprise me if it was as permanent as one, seeing as it's had three weeks to solidify and gnaw away at the toilet rim like the Devil's been slowly carving away at these people's souls.

God Almighty, who ever heard of folks striking from a church? First staying away, like without them God wouldn't be able to continue doing His work. Like Jesus Himself was going to come knock down their doors and offer them better wages if they would just come back. Now they've taken to picketing the lawn, chanting some nonsense about how God empowered man to invent electric fans so that His people would suffer no more. The people cried out in hunger and He sent down the manna.

They're out there now. I can hear them. Through the crack in the blinds, I can see Sanders, the Choir Director, carrying a sign that reads, "God deserves better than a bunch of hot air!" Look at them. Out there throwing a damn parade while that crazy bastard runs loose, leaving their homes wide open, practically telling him, Sure! Come on in and light her up! I tell you one thing, this may be God's justice for this sorry town but if it is, then it should be His servant who lays these timbers to rest, not some crackpot fool from Clearwater County.

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The hay bales have been in the basement so long they make a loud snapping sound when I grip the sides and lug them one by one up the stairs. It only takes one match. The flames move through the parched straw like a serpent slithering towards its prey, down the aisles, illuminating the altar steps, like footlights in the old opera house uptown. The glowing tongues lap at the pulpit, growing stronger and taller and stranger somehow, gaining momentum as they burn through the varnish. It's almost beautiful. The sanctuary is alight. Brighter even than high noon on a midsummer's day with every window open. It's radiant. And hot. God Almighty, it's hot.