

Sermon January 10, 2010
1st Sunday of Epiphany
Baptism by Fire

The baptism of Jesus. Take a minute look in your mind's eye. The crowd, the robes, John the baptist in sandals, strident but gentle. Jesus comes to be baptized---John objects, but says, "no it has to be this way." Jesus goes under the water, and comes up. And all see a dove and hear a distinct voice "this is my Son the beloved. I am well pleased." This story, as we have received it from Children's Bible publishers and renaissance painters, is actually a compilation of four Gospel accounts. Each one has its own quirks, but the overall picture is unified, the story's essence, plain. Or is it?

As the story is told in Mark, Jesus is baptized by John, Jesus comes up from the water and *he* sees the heavens are torn apart and *he* sees the spirit descend. A voice calls, but it is unclear who hears it. In Matthew, we get the familiar exchange between John and Jesus, where John is embarrassed to baptized his Lord. In his version also, it is *Jesus* who sees the Heavens open. The Voice speaks, but it is unclear who hears it or whether or not it is audible. In John, it is *John* who sees the spirit descend and hears the voice. And in Luke's recounting of the event, today's reading, when Jesus is Baptized, John in in prison. (??)

OK Now I am confused. If the point of the story was John's conversation with and baptism of Jesus, then how can Luke be teaching the same lesson, if he doesn't even think John was present. This is a problem.

Thankfully the people who created our lectionary figured out how to fix it.

Sometimes the indicated lection for the day, which is what ends up in your bulletin, skips over a chunk of the original text here and there. For a variety of reasons. Perhaps that chunk has nothing to do with the rest of the passage. Perhaps It is violent or otherwise distasteful, or seems to cast God in a contradictory light--good thing God has us to fix that, hunh?!

In the instance of today's gospel reading a chunk has been excised and if you will humor me I'd like to read it. You can feel free to look at your bulletin. Here is how the actual middle of the passage reads as it appears in the Gospel of Luke:

This you have: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Now here is what actually comes next, "So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison," and then the passage continues as printed.

So, John the prophet, was doing what prophets do, he was calling attention to the sins of the people in hopes that they would repent. In hopes that *his* exhortations would be experienced as good news. Herod, called out by John for both divorce and incest, did not consider this public chastisement good news. And so he shut John up. He added to his evils jailing and eventually killing the prophetic messenger.

With this portion restored the meaning of the story seems quite different. What Jesus did that day, with or without John was not about doves and voices, it was about sin and judgment. With exhortations he preached good news. By calling out the sins and evils of the people, he brought joy. After adding back this distasteful reference to a pompous and incestuous divorcee, we can see that a truer point of intersection for these four stories is not what happened in the water, but what happens in the fire.

What do I mean? There are discrepancies of character action and intention among these four stories. But there is one thought that is consistent through all four accounts-- Jesus would baptize with the holy spirit and fire.

Matthew reads, "He will baptize with the holy Spirit and fire;" Mark: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit;" John: "This is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit," and today's version from Luke: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

BAPTISM WITH the Holy Spirit and fire. All four writers on the same page. So what is it that the writers say that the Holy Spirit does? Holy Holy Holy. The Holy Spirit sets us on fire.

Throughout scripture, fire is a metaphor used for judgement. Holy Spirit fire judges and purifies and burns to the point of substantive change.

Judgement is a bad word today. Judgement is considered to be something that is leveled, usually from a mean spirit. Or Judgment is feared. The last judgement where our errors appear on a list whose length determines our ultimate destination. Many of us are concerned about that moral math.

It is a new year. A new decade. We may even still be on our new diet. Many of us have been reflecting on what we can do better. How can we pull away the behaviors and actions that make us less than, that prevent us from being all that we can be as lovers, spouses, parents or friends. It is a time when we are all Jewish, coming clean on our socially sanctioned day of atonement. I am really ...I need to...its time for..

It is possible that our spiritual and or religious life has appeared on our lists. Our year in review and promises looking forward. To pray. To read. To be kind. To go to church. To volunteer. To serve on the vestry...never actually heard of that being a New Year's resolution... but you know, we can dream.

As our sort of ongoing state of guilt and fallen-shortness comes into concert with our corporate day of confession, we may experience the baptism of John. We like all have

gone astray. What we have done what we have left undone. We put it out there. We vow to give it up and start the year determined and in some sense absolved for our having told the truth to ourselves about the ways we fall short. And as we are able, we receive the forgiveness of sins.

In the repentance of New Years, we beat our breasts and judge *ourselves*. Though simultaneous, it is our private process. But the moment we sense judgement coming from outside, we balk. or hide. or fight. At any cost, we shut it up.

And we pay dearly for his silence. For in our hurry to kill messengers we completely miss the gift of judgment and fire. For Luke the Spirit comes and will burn chaff in the service of gathering grain. God is clearing away the detritus, the gunk, that which impedes growth and flourishing. The burning is good news.

This fire, the fire that is the gift of Christ, descends not as a hammer, but as a dove. It alights. It surrounds and fills. While there is pain in the purification, there is sweet humility and joy. In being made low, we find unknown heights of joy. In yielding to the spirit's purifying blaze, we can, as Jesus did, hear and touch the heart of God.

As the prophet Isaiah testified,

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

God's word, spoken through the prophet--
Get ready. I am going to set you on fire.

To clear away the gunk.

To unbind you.

To re-deem you.

To restore you.

To release you.

To re-constitute you.

To re-mind you.

To re-fine you.

To remake you.

Stay a while. Stay until the fire melts the shame. Stay until the exhortation is good news. Stay until the Epiphany.