

Epiphany 1: January 9/10, 2016

Water, Wind and Fire

Luke 3:15-22

The Christ will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. –John



Water, wind and fire. These elements are ubiquitous, that is, they are everywhere in our life and world. Like just about everything else, they can be a blessing or a curse. There's nothing better than a gentle **wind** on a spring day. Yet talk to natives of Oklahoma and most have a story of a close encounter with a twister. **Water** is fundamental to our existence. Yet too little, like in California, or too much, like our recent flooding, and you have the makings of disaster. And nothing is cozier than a crackling **fire** on a cold winter night. But let fire get out of control and you have a raging inferno. Water, wind and fire. They are present at Jesus' baptism. They are present at every baptism since. What is their significance?



Church-year time compression continues. We celebrated Jesus' birth but 17 days ago. Two weeks ago he was 40 days old at his consecration in the temple. Last week he could have been up to two years old when the magi appeared with their Epiphany gifts. And now, a mere seven days later, he is thirty years old as he inaugurates his public ministry with his baptism by John. A bit of a whirlwind, but reflective of the quietude of the biblical record of Jesus' childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. But the record is not silent on his baptism. It is decisive for his mission, which the angel articulated to Joseph: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." If Jesus identified with us in our humanity by his birth in Bethlehem, he identified with us in our sin by his baptism in the Jordan. He was marked with his sin-saving mission long before public opposition arose from entrenched authorities.



"Do you come to me [to be baptized]?" John asks of Jesus. "I need to be baptized by you." John gives voice to all children born of man since our fall into sin. *I need to be baptized by you.* The sin that Jesus identified with in his baptism was not his own. It was mine. It was yours. We know it only too well. And not in just the heinous acts of violence

that are splashed across the media. It exists in the multitude of small ways that we disrespect each other, when we subtly pursue our gain over another's need, when we assert our will over God's. This is where we live, and John cries out against it. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." And with water he baptizes those who come to him confessing their sins. Water. Present at Jesus' baptism. Present for us as the cleansing washing of Holy Baptism. It all begins with this washing. Our sin must be removed if we are to enter into the presence of a holy God. "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean," commands our God through the prophet Isaiah. "Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil." That which we are unable to do of ourselves, God does in baptism. So we join the flood of people who went to the Jordan River to be baptized. It is why we bring our children, why we compel those we are sent to to believe the Good News and be baptized. Water to remove sin.



The post-Christmas flooding touched many lives. We have prayed for the. Gail and I were not exempt, as we discovered upon return from a brief getaway that our basement was porous and carpeting there got soaked. I spent all day last Saturday cutting, rolling, tying, and hauling soggy carpet out of our basement. At the end of the day I smelled of dank, clammy, even moldy carpet. Gail would not allow me into her presence until I had showered. The water of baptism makes us clean such as this, though it be a cleansing of righteousness. "I will sprinkle clean water on you," says God through the prophet Ezekiel. "You shall be clean from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you." The slate wiped clean. No condemnation. It's called forgiveness. And it is the most gracious word you will ever hear. And it comes in the cleansing water of baptism.



Water to remove sin. Water to make clean. Water to die to sin. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? The image of drowning evoked in immersion baptism is well considered. For our sinful nature which is hostile to God and enslaved to sin is drown and dies in Holy Baptism. That life is over. Sin is still present, to be sure. But not controlling us. And God, who for so many is distant and hostile, invites us into his presence and to engage him in robust conversation.



“When Jesus had been baptized, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove.” The Spirit, the *Ruah* or Wind of God, was present. Wind, breath, present to give life. I was privileged to be present at the birth of my four children. I heard them take their first breaths. I heard their tiny voices declare their arrival. They had come through the waters and been given, as it were, a resurrection. It was humbling and marvelous to behold. Not dissimilar to the vision of Ezekiel. “Prophecy over these dry bones,” says the Lord, “behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” It’s called regeneration. To make alive again. To resurrect. That is exactly what happens in baptism. A death occurs. In the words of St. Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live.” And a resurrection occurs. “I no longer live but Christ lives in me.” We breathe deeply of the rich air of salvation, fully alive as the children of God. Guaranteed an inheritance with the children of light.



The Wind of God fills our lungs with resurrection hope. Jesus knew that death could not hold him. As Christ lives in all who believe, death cannot hold us either. What does resurrection hope look like? I saw it in the faces of members this past week who buried a grandfather, a mother, and a husband. They were both tearful and joyful. Death had been swallowed up in victory. I heard it in the voices of members who were hospitalized, who were both anxious and yet confident. Jesus’ “I am with you always,” was their hope and stay. ?And for us who navigated a relative routine of the past week? Resurrection hope provided a beacon to guide us forward in faith and life. “If we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” *We shall certainly be.* Such certainty is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.



“The Christ will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Baptismal fire animates speech. For how can we who have been so deeply loved not speak of such wonders? Jeremiah knew of this urge. “If I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’

there is in my heart a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in; I cannot.” It’s like the parent of a newborn who is eager to show pictures of their child. Or the newly engaged with a beautiful diamond just shouting to be seen. Baptismal fire compels our witness. Not always from the mountaintop. Sometimes in the flooded basement of a neighbor. But always present. For why else would we serve one another but for the fact that the Son of Man came, not be served but, to serve? We can’t keep “God bless you” in, and when such a seed falls on fertile ground, it quite naturally leads into a conversation on the presence, pardon and power of Jesus.



St. Paul, bring it home for us today. **Water to cleanse. Wind to breathe life. Fire to animate speech and service.** What does it mean to me on a cold and snowy wintry day? Paul calls it “newness of life.” “We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might walk in *newness of life*.” This much we know from Jesus’ baptism. It was the beginning of a journey that took him through wilderness and rejection, to thorns and a cross. Yet in spite of such obstacles, he remained the resurrection and the life. Baptism has connected us to Christ in both his death and his resurrection. So we have newness of life—Jesus’ life—coursing in our veins. Not to insulate us from life difficulties. Rather, to enable us to embrace them and recognize them as opportunities to grow deeper in faith, eager in service, bolder in witness. Amazing that such things can result from water, wind and fire. Amen