

## By the Holy Spirit and Fire

Baptism of Jesus Yr C Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 January 9, 2022

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John the Baptist never claims to be the Messiah. But the people who hear John preach, see the effect he is having, and recognize that he speaks for God start to wonder. They wonder if he is the one who will change everything, the one who will save them from what was happening, the one who will usher in the promised future. Which is why John address them directly and says “I am not the Messiah.”

And I think it would be tempting at this point to just skip over the rest of John’s words and pay no further attention to him because quiet frankly John prepares the way for Jesus. Which means we don’t look to John for our direction, we look to Jesus. We don’t follow John, we follow Jesus. But because we follow Jesus we need to hear what John has to say about him.

Because while John isn’t the promised one, the Saviour from God, John is the one who announces and gets us ready for Jesus. So what John has to say, the words he uses to talk about Jesus are important for us to hear. And what John says in our lesson is that what he, John the Baptist, what he is doing, what he is able to make happen in the world is insignificant compared to the wonders and changes which Jesus will bring about. For while John is baptizing with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And I want to stay with that image of baptism with water for a moment because that is the way we baptize. Our parents bring us as children or we come as adults and promises are made to follow Jesus, to grow within the church, and to share in the mission of God’s people to the world. And those promises, our actions flow from what John calls the people to do in our lesson as he uses the water as a sign of the cleansing and new life the people are starting. And people of faith have used baptism as a ritual of promise and hope from the time when people began to gather as the church, which is what the reading from Acts relates.

And that is important in our faith. We make the promises of baptism and that shapes how we live and grow in our lives. The people surrounding us support and encourage us to answer the call of Jesus. Turning to God points us in the right direction and that commitment, that promise, that life we choose to lead,

opens the door for the Holy Spirit to change us and the world.

Now I know this new year is not what any of us expected it to be. All of us hoped to be past the restrictions and uncertainly around Covid by the time we hit 2022. But more than a week into January we're still living with it and our world is still upside down. But, and this is important, none of that changes what we have promised in our baptism and what we decide by choosing to be followers of Jesus. If anything because our world is so anxious and unsure and fearful, we need to hang onto those promises to remind us to look to Jesus, to make faith a priority, and to let the Holy Spirit work in our lives.

And I know when you are tired, when you are discouraged, and when you don't know how you can keep going and the last thing you need is someone telling you to do something in your life. When we are tired we want to rest. When we are discouraged, we want someone else to take over. When we don't know how to keep going, we want to stop.

But this day I'm saying this to you, I'm telling you to boldly be a person of faith because you are tired. I'm telling you to hold onto the promises of God because you are discouraged. And I'm telling you to make faith a priority because you don't know how you can keep going. Because when you do those things, when you turn to God and open your hearts and your hands, when you look to Jesus, then you let the Holy Spirit in and that changes everything.

Because the sacrament we perform with water and the promises we make in our lives to follow Jesus are only the start of what happens in baptism. John gets us ready for Jesus and points the way. And that is what baptism does- it gets us ready for what God is doing by getting us pointed in the right direction, focused on faith, and following Jesus.

And when we do that, when we open our lives to the salvation and hope that Jesus brings, then God answers us with a power and a possibility which changes us and our world. For John tells us that Jesus, what Jesus does for us, is to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And that brings us to the part in our lesson where John talks about the

winnowing fork and the wheat and the chaff. A reminder that Jesus comes to separate the good from the bad. And if like me you've heard that before as a description of judgement you worry. You worry about being rejected and wrong and not worthy. About being cast aside rather than gathered up. And I'll be honest being tired and discouraged and frustrated mean we often feel more like chaff than wheat.

But, and this is important, the good news of Jesus isn't that Jesus comes to choose the best of us and cast the rest away. The salvation of Jesus isn't that those who have kept it together and are doing fine get the reward of heaven. The hope of the gospel isn't that God's love is reserved for the strong and the holy.

No my friends, the good news of Jesus Christ, the salvation we see in the cross, the hope which has changed the lives of so many is that in Jesus, God reaches for us in our weakness, our failure, our need, and embraces us. Through Jesus, God holds us close so we know we are loved and heals our pain and sorrow and gives us what we need to not merely continue but to thrive.

We turn to God and then Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit so that God's love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and peace become part of us. They become part of who we are and how we live. And they allow the fire to burn away what is holding us back, hindering our lives, making us less than what we can be as God's people. Jesus comes to get the chaff, the bad stuff out of our lives so that those lives are transformed.

So turn to God. Turn to God because you are tired and weak. Turn to God because you are worried and weary. Turn to God because you feel lost and alone. And let God answer you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

So that the love of God calms your fears and holds you through this time. So that the forgiveness of God opens your ears to hear the truth that you are loved and precious. So that the grace of God sets you afire with strength and wisdom and love so that the good news of Jesus is real to you and so that good news is seen through what you say and through what you do.