

Epiphany 1C/Baptism of our Lord
Sermon 1.12.25

Isaiah 43:1-7

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. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up', and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.'

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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 when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' (354)

The funny thing about Luke's telling of Jesus' baptism is that he doesn't actually tell about the baptism. We get the buildup, John's fiery preaching and the people filled with expectation. And we get the after-scene, when all were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized. But we don't get the baptism itself.

I'm not the first to point this out. This is commonly noticed and just as commonly wondered about. It's as if Luke wanted the emphasis to be on the something other than the action of baptism, and on some primary actor other than John.

Each gospel writer seems to have had this same worry about John, the very same worry John himself seems to have had. Because in what world is it right that John should baptize Jesus? Really, when it comes to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, in what world is right that Jesus should be baptized at all?

No surprise, I'd argue what I always argue when it comes to repentance, that this isn't what we most easily think it is, that it isn't merely about taking a good, hard look at yourself so you can finally come to grips with all you've done wrong—which would, of course, would make you wonder

whether Jesus really needed such a thing at all. If Jesus is, as the confession goes, born without sin, then why should he be remembered as seeking out such a baptism?

But repentance isn't merely about taking a good, hard look at yourself so you can finally come to grips with all you've done wrong. It is rather about that change of mind that would have us more closely adopting the mind of God. *Metanoia* is the Greek original that's translated "repentance," and it means the sort of knowing that goes beyond what we more typically would know. *Metanoia* is the sort of knowledge that is grand in its scope, the mysteries that lie before and above and behind and beyond, which might include some insight into where you've gone wrong but is by no means limited to that—or really limited to anything. There's always more to know. It's always the case that knowledge might be made more full and freeing, more grand and wizing.

I'd further argue, as I nearly always do, that repentance for the forgiveness of sin isn't a cause-and-effect thing: you don't have to repent in order to be forgiven. It's more an effect-and-cause thing, you can repent because there is forgiveness. Really, you're encouraged to repent in that there's little to fear in repenting. On the contrary, there's a lot to hope for in repenting. The change of mind that is repentance would have us see and know the release that God's forgiveness is, release from compulsion, release, freedom from what otherwise might be shame or destructive habits of mind and habits of action.

In this way, it's maybe not so odd that Jesus should submit to such a baptism as this, because John's baptism wasn't something to undergo in order to receive forgiveness but was more perhaps a rite of recognition, affirmation, and perhaps even more so of celebration, that there is forgiveness, which is freedom and release, and there is repentance, whereby human knowing might approach more divine knowing. So, really, if John's baptism is more an act of confession and profession and affirmation such as this, why wouldn't Jesus long to participate in this? As an inaugurating of his witness of the reality and presence of God, the wisdom and power of God, why wouldn't he submit to this rite that is to profess this—that there is forgiveness, there is freedom and release in God, and that there is a sort of knowledge that we can seek, wisdom beyond what we typically know.

But that's not the sum total of the worry of the gospel writers when it comes to Jesus's submission to John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. It's not only this baptism that had the gospel writers worry when it came to Jesus' submission to it. It's also, indeed maybe more so, that Jesus submitted to John and not, say, the other way around. Indeed, (they seem to worry that) instead of John baptizing Jesus it should be Jesus to baptize John.

Which John as much said. In all four gospels, it's John himself remembered to have insisted, "Someone is coming who is more powerful than I am," said as if to assure the hearer that he knows what we know, that this whole thing is a little awkward, and that he's not engaged in some power grab. What's more, Matthew's telling of it does one better. He remembers John saying to Jesus, "I should be baptized by you. And do you come to me?"

Luke, for his part, removes the baptism altogether, makes it something we never even see. It's anticipated and then it's done. Just so, Luke, it would seem, wasn't only worried that John might seem more powerfully active than he should. He was also worried that the baptism itself might seem more powerfully active than it should, more initiating of powers and possibilities than it should. It's not the baptism, Luke seems to insist, though quietly, by sleight of hand; it's the Holy Spirit. The baptism didn't initiate whatever might be thought initiated at baptism, the Holy Spirit did it. It's not the water and the submersion; it's the Holy Spirit. It's always the Holy Spirit.

According to Luke, it is always the Holy Spirit.

Already it has been frequently the Holy Spirit. Already by this 3rd chapter of the gospel, the Holy Spirit has been understood as active six times, from the Spirit's approach to Zechariah, the father of John, to the promise to Mary that the son she'd bear would be conceived by the Holy Spirit, to the presence of the Holy Spirit in Simeon in the Temple when the baby Jesus was there being presented.

Just so, the Spirit will continue to work through this gospel and even past it, into Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles wherein Jesus now gone, ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit would be understood as continuing its work through the life and witness of the early church. Nearly every noteworthy thing that happens according to Luke happens by virtue of the Holy Spirit. What's more, the Holy Spirit is so acutely present to Jesus and the early church because these are so regularly at prayer.

In fact, when later in this gospel Jesus speaks of prayer, he does so with the promise that what results in prayer is the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We tend to hear it otherwise. We tend to bring expectation to it otherwise, to the degree that we bring any awareness to this at all. Jesus is remembered to have said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you... Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask

him!” And we tend to recall this as meaning whatever we pray for we will get. Pray for good weather on your wedding day, and true faith will have you get it. Pray for a private airplane and however strong your faith will directly correspond with what size airplane you find in your back yard.

But what Jesus is actually saying here is that what receive in prayer isn’t this thing or that thing, whatever thing we pray for. What we receive in prayer is the presence of the Holy Spirit, unfailingly, ever reliably, the presence of God who is ever present, ever waiting for us to turn to God to receive of God’s wisdom, forgiveness, faithfulness, love.

Does this feel like a letdown? Would you have preferred a private jet over the attending presence of the Holy Spirit?

At least with a private jet we could get away from so much that concerns us.

As if. As if it weren’t the whole world that concerns us

And there will be much to concern us in coming weeks, months—more fires to break out if not all of them so terribly literal as the ones now eating Los Angeles.

Are you bracing yourself?

It’s impossible to know which shock to the system the new administration will administer first.

As many of you know, my prayer life can’t be described as disciplined. I don’t have a regular time and practice. It doesn’t take a regular and recognizable form. But more and more I’m aware of it being a constant in my life, a current I attune to a lot, a frequency I’m frequent about. Call and response. Call and response.

It helps.

Apparently, when you’re headed for a crash, bracing yourself isn’t nearly as protective as calming yourself, centering yourself. Loosen your body as you attune your spirit. Listen for the possibility of God and respond accordingly. It’s a possibility you can count on, an arrival on time. The fire burns unquenchable, and also unconsuming.

This image that in John’s preaching sounds so threatening—unquenchable fire, which is indeed threatening, as we all know this week all too well—erupts in scripture all over the place, and not as a settled thing. Fire is not an imagine in scripture, a metaphor, whose meaning is stable. Fire as punishing? Fire as purifying? Fire as the means by which Jesus cooks his friends some breakfast. Consider, fire first shows itself in the burning bush, which like being itself burns though doesn’t consume, doesn’t exhaust and destroy. In this same vein, it will again show itself in Luke’s

writing at the birth of the church, when all the believers gathered in Jerusalem that day would have alighted on them tongues as of flame, the church itself an unquenchable, inexhaustible, though also undestroying fire.

It burns even still, God does, the spirit does. Come, warm your hands by it. Come warm your heart. Things are extreme out there. Tune yourself to that which is at the center of things, the being of all beings.

It helps.

It helps.

Thanks be to God.