

Sermon: Affirmation

New North Church, Hingham

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9 January 2022

Based on **Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Water and fire stand out in today's readings.

If you have ever received an email from me that I sent from my phone, it probably says 'Sent from somewhere west of Chaos' at the end. The waters, especially the untamed oceans, have always signified the threat and danger of chaos. In Marshfield, we live three miles due west from Chaos as the crow flies.

In the early chapters of Isaiah, fire signified punishment and divine wrath. However, today's chapter was added to the book shortly before the end of the Babylonian exile in 539 BCE. A new day has come, and Isaiah signals it by saying, '*But now...*'

Forget that your cities burned with fire (1:7); that your fields burned because you rejected the LORD'S instruction (5:24). The burning featured in Israel's decline and fall was intended to destroy and purify. *But now* the Exile is almost over. The waters will not overwhelm, and the fire will not consume.

God promises safe passage and a new relationship. "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you," says the LORD. "Do not fear for I am with you."

Safe passage, the fulfillment of an ancient promise, and God's liberation form the backdrop to today's Gospel reading.

Luke tells us that baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that Jesus' public ministry only began after John the Baptist's arrest. John the Evangelist tells it differently in his Gospel, but we'll worry about that later.

In the verses that we *didn't* read today, 18-20, John gets himself arrested, and *then* Luke narrates Jesus' baptism by John. He tells it in reverse chronological order to let us know that John was *not* the most important person here, that he was secondary to Jesus, that he only pointed us toward Jesus.

So, here's a question people have asked for 2,000 years: Did Jesus need baptism? He's the Son of God, right? You would think that that would be enough.

What we know from Luke is that Jesus was with *all* the people, and that maybe Jesus was last in line because he's polite. The birth narrative shows that Jesus was born into a world of sin and his baptism shows that, yes, he needed baptism to show he stood with the sinners. Let no one say, 'Well, Jesus wasn't baptized, so why should I be?'

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus was born as one of us and now begins his ministry by becoming like us in accepting the baptism of repentance and forgiveness that we need.¹

A man named Clarence Jordan, a farmer and Greek New Testament scholar, paraphrased and transposed the Gospels from Galilee to rural Georgia. He called his translation *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, and in it, the president stood in for Caesar; the governor of Georgia took Herod's place; Bethlehem became Gainesville; and the crucifixion became a lynching.

His editor called him 'a disturber of the peace,' and by that, he meant the divisive, racist, economically unjust peace of the rural Deep South in the early twentieth century.

Now imagine that we were among his audience of black tenant farmers who endured persecution and injustice as did Jesus' followers and we heard these modern words from Luke's Gospel:

'So it happened that while the people were getting baptized, Jesus too was baptized. And as he prayed, the sky was split and the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove came down on him. And from the sky came a voice, saying, "You are my dear Son; *I'm proud of you.*"'

Who among that audience wouldn't want to hear an affirmation like that, especially if it came from God? It's an immediate lift, hearing words like that. Some people go their whole lives without hearing a word of praise or encouragement. But these words sent Jesus out to begin his ministry.

John the Baptist spoke about Jesus carrying his winnowing fork in his hand. John turned a common agricultural practice into a metaphor about something else. The wheat and the chaff are all one thing until it hits the threshing floor for the winnowing fork to separate. The chaff is the leftover stuff, an external husk that has no value to God, metaphorically things like your personal wealth or social standing; it is gathered and

burned because there's no reason to keep it. The wheat it covers, on the other hand, is valuable and so is saved and gathered into God's granary.

We often think it's 50-50 whether we're the wheat or the chaff, and we usually imagine that *of course* we're the chaff because we said a bad word or something.

If you're struggling in your life and you're feeling down, if things are going bad, if you think of yourself as nothing but a no-good sinner, then it's easy to believe that you *must* be chaff, destined for the unquenchable fire, and too bad for you; you deserve it.

But you would be wrong. That's not what Scripture says and it's not how God works. Even in our darkest moments, God values us in the same way a farmer values husked wheat. We're all worth something. We are all wheat in God's eyes.

Regarding baptism, each of the four Gospels understand Jesus' in a different way. Luke puts an emphasis on prayer: Jesus was praying when heaven opened. This shows us that, just as Jesus comes to us in our sin, in all our imperfections, he also comes to God in prayer. The Holy Spirit became a source of strength and encouragement for Jesus.

So, how does this work in *our* lives? How do we know the Spirit has come to *us*? If the Holy Spirit is on the loose in the world, working in and through Jesus and the baptized, how do we keep that in mind? Sometimes, it seems we're all too busy to keep it together long enough to ask God for help or to offer thanks. It doesn't take much to be buried by a pile of work to do, or phone calls to make, or whatever it is that occupies our waking lives. Some of us we have all we can do just to stop and be still.

God doesn't see it that way. Each of us is called by God to fulfill some purpose. Not a plan but a purpose. God knows we're busy. But God also gave us the Sabbath to help us figure it out.

In our baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire, as God's beloved children, we take on a new identity, a unique and secure identity.

God said, 'you are my child; I am proud of you.' That's an affirmation that we need to hear. As God's words gave Jesus a lift at the beginning of his ministry, so too should we let them lift us up as well.

Amen.

¹ Rogness, Michael. "'You Are My Son, the Beloved': The Epiphany Gospels." *Word & World*, vol. 24, no. 1, Winter 2004, pp. 87.