

## **Holy Spirit and Fire**

**Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22**

The world doesn't really know much about Jesus' life before he burst on the scene as a man. The birth stories in Matthew and Luke are very different from each other. There are no birth accounts in Mark and John. The biblical gospel accounts come together, however, at the baptism of Jesus. They all seem to agree about the influence of John the baptizer at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Today, after all the attention we gave to celebrating Jesus' birth at Christmas, today we celebrate the "baptism of the Lord". This emphasis, in the church's calendar, gives us a chance to focus on the interchange between John and Jesus, to examine the ceremony of baptism and how John practiced it, and consider how that experience seemed to launch Jesus' ministry. And, we will ask if there is something in the story to help us on our journey of faith.

Baptism is an ancient Jewish rite consisting of dipping or immersing in water. Originally a ritual of purification, baptism became a symbol of the dedication of converts to Judaism to the God of Israel. Christians took the practice over from Jews and we differ widely in our practice of it. Some of us immerse, some sprinkle, and others do everything in between. The meaning of Christian baptism differs among its practitioners. Some say it's essential for salvation. For others, it's only a rite of initiation. Still others consider it a symbolic statement of commitment to following Jesus. Some Christians baptize infants. Some wait for an age of accountability and baptize after a profession of faith.

John was busy baptizing Jews and Gentiles alike. He was an indiscriminate baptizer and his was not an initiation into Judaism. John's baptism symbolized a person's preparation for the coming kingdom of God. His message proclaimed that this kingdom would be brought by "one whose sandals [he was] unworthy to carry".

The message is clear in Luke's Gospel. It points clearly to Jesus as the chosen one who would baptize by Holy Spirit and fire. Holy Spirit and fire remind us of Pentecost and the story, also by Luke, of the coming of the Holy Spirit with tongues of fire.

This image of baptism by fire would be John's own experience as he was soon to be imprisoned and executed by Herod. Jesus' baptism by water soon would become fire with the wilderness temptations, the challenges of his ministry, and ultimately his death on a cross.

Who was John? He might have been Jesus' cousin. Some thought of him as the return of Elijah prophet. In today's scripture lesson, many thought he was the Messiah. He was certainly connected closely to the community of the Essenes, famous for leaving us the Dead sea scrolls. John certainly had a great influence on Jesus' ministry.

In telling the story of John, Luke is telling his readers the meaning of Jesus' life. Jesus became the focus of apocalyptic expectation, the coming of a new age marked by judgment, as discernment, revealing truth, not just about God, but also about the state Judaism and its people. The gentle Jesus brings a challenging message that cuts to the core of our lives. Jesus' teaching and example represent a baptism of fire to us.

After his baptism, Jesus experiences the numinous, the Holy, God. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and there's a voice from heaven: "you are my son". The voice echoes an angels' chorus with God's promise of peace to all "people of good will". Luke proclaims that this is such a man. God's favor rests on Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

Baptism is a ritual with water. In a broader sense, it is a rite of passage, often challenging. It's a defining experience that marks the presence of a renewed person. To the prophet Isaiah, Israel's defining experiences were the exodus and the exile, when he writes:

But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, Jacob, who formed you, 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. (Isaiah 43)

Our baptisms shape us and define us.

I don't know whom of you reading this has been baptized. As you think about baptism, in the conventional sense, what did it mean to you. Was the experience part of a changed life for you? How understand your experience of baptism today?

Think also about baptism in the broader sense of life-defining experiences such as exodus, exile, wilderness, and the cross. What baptisms have you experienced? How have they changed your life? How do you understand the experience(s) today?

Baptism is essential to the nature of the gospel of Jesus. Not only does this gospel help us not fear the hard times of life -- the wilderness, fire, loneliness, and death shadows -- it teaches us about the nature of these experiences. They are baptisms of fire, perhaps not as extreme as martyrdom or a soldier's first experience of battle, but profound and life-changing gifts from God. Long ago, the Arab philosopher Kahlil Gibran wrote about the nature of faithful people. Though a non-Christian, he seemed to reflect the understanding of Jesus.

There are those who give little of the much they have  
and they give it for recognition  
and their hidden desire makes their gifts unwholesome.  
And there are those who have little  
and give it all ...and their coffer is never empty  
There are those who give with joy  
and that joy is their reward  
And there are those who give with pain  
and that pain is their baptism. (from *The Prophet*)

To follow Jesus means to come to our baptisms with open eyes and to pass through water and fire. When he pass through, the God of all of us descends on each of us in peace to bless us, to bless you. "This is my beloved daughter, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.

God of all baptisms, all waters, all fires -- God of all of life, I do not thank you for all the baptisms, the pain, the shadows, and the rites of passage in my life. I do thank you for your presence through all of them. I also thank you for the understanding that they are a pathway to abundant life. They are the way Jesus walked, the truth Jesus knew, the life Jesus lived. Such baptism is the only way to find him, to find ourselves, and to find you. Lead us by faith. Amen.