

## **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."\*

## **Of Floods and Fires** - January 9, 2022

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

Jesus grows up really fast in the Bible, doesn't he? I mean, our tree and lights are still up and here we are, celebrating the Baptism of the Lord. Suddenly, the baby is now an adult and ready to begin his mission of reconciling the world with God. Of course, we don't really have much material to go on after the wise men visit Jesus in Bethlehem when he was two years old, causing Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to run for their lives down to Egypt. There is a story about twelve-year-old Jesus visiting Jerusalem with his parents to attend the Passover celebration and then deciding to hang around at the Temple as the rest of the family returns to Nazareth. But that's about it.

John baptizes Jesus, reporting that as Jesus emerged from the water a voice said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Go to work, Jesus.

Traditionally in our congregation and many others, we use this Sunday of the Baptism of the Lord to remind ourselves of the significance of the Sacrament of Baptism. Typically, we would fill our baptismal font with water and stones and ask you to come forward to touch the water and take a stone as a reminder of your own baptism.

This year, of course, we are worshipping online once more. I, like you, had hoped that by this point in our efforts to battle Covid, the nation would be vaccinated and we would all be back to gathering without masks again. Such has not been the case, quite sadly. Maybe we'll say goodbye to Covid this year, maybe not.

However, it is still quite appropriate to talk about the significance of the Sacrament of Baptism to our faith. Last week, I sought to remind us of how, when we join together during the Lord's Supper, we are in a way eating and drinking the Lord. We Presbyterians regard the Eucharist as being much more than symbolic. When we take communion, we are doing much more than reenacting the Lord's Supper.

Certainly, communion serves in part to unite us with the apostles who gathered around the Table with Jesus 2000 years ago. It wasn't just for them. Jesus certainly intended that his body and blood was sacrificed not just for his immediate followers but for all humanity and all generations. But more than a just a remembrance of the past is taking place at the Table. Jesus is truly present with us. By drinking and eating we are taking Jesus within our bodies. The bread and the cup literally merge themselves with us physically just as Jesus is merging himself with us spiritually.

Spirituality friends is an aspect of our faith that I fear falls short in our understanding. When we worship God, this gathering is not just an intellectual exercise. The sermon that I preach is not a lecture. Our meeting during the service and gathering after the service is not just a time for fellowship. Rather, our prayers, songs, readings, and prayers are intended to awaken us to experiencing Christ inside us — and this is so hard for many Christians to understand and accept. Friends, our religion, our faith, our Christianity is nothing unless we accept that Jesus Christ is living — is alive right now — and through the Holy Spirit is living inside of us.

I have no idea of how you experience God in our daily lives. For some, God is alive and present during this time of worship. For others, they experience God when they are in the company of fellow believers. Others sense God in the awesomeness of nature or the cry of a newborn. Still others find God in times of peaceful, quiet meditation. Regardless of how you experience the presence of God in your life, there is both an external component and an internal component.

Knowing God externally consists of what our senses see, hear, feel, smell and taste. That is why Holy Communion is celebrated with literal bread and literal wine. All our senses are involved in receiving the sacrament. Some traditions go even further, adding incense and playing bells to intensify the external experience of encountering God. And that is great.

However, if we only experience God externally, we miss the point of Jesus' coming into the world. Jesus is not here to teach us and be an example for us only on the outside. After all, there are dozens, even hundreds of human beings who are great teachers and role models. But unlike them, Jesus also comes to us spiritually. By that I mean Jesus is part of our existence in a way which is beyond the ability of our senses to fully experience or our intellect to totally describe.

In short, words, human words, are woefully insufficient to help us truly experience God. Ironically, I am using words right now to describe the indescribable. Yes, experiencing God extends beyond our intellect. Experiencing God extends beyond our emotions. Experiencing God extends beyond our senses. If you believe that life consists solely of what our brains can think about and emotionally react to or what our senses transmit, then yes, any talk of spiritually is pure nonsense.

But spiritually encountering God is not merely a physiological or intellectual experience. Somehow, a part of us is resonating with God and it resonates with us because God is truly inside of us. Spirituality is therefore a kind of communication that cannot be measured by any device. Holy Communion reminds us that because Christ is inside of us, we have a way of accessing God that

transcends our human existence. For want of a better word, we call the part of us that is in touch with God, our soul.

Perhaps when I say the word “soul” you think of the scene in “Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban” during which the souls of Harry and Sirius Black are pictured as clusters of sparkling light emerging from their mouths. Some scientists claim to have located the part of the brain where the human soul resides. Others claim our souls permeate our bodies. All these are discussions that are far beyond my understanding and are frankly irrelevant. Human beings, all of us, have access to God in a way beyond comprehension and explanation which we call our “soul” and communion is one way we have to nurture that access to God.

But there is another aspect to our spirituality which is bound up in the sacrament we call Baptism. The purpose of Baptism is, in the words of John the Baptizer, to fill us with “the Holy Spirit and with fire.” In other words, baptism is a transformative event — a once-in-a-lifetime transformative event. Baptism, in short, is our human way of visibly demonstrating God’s presence within our lives. If communion serves to nourish our souls, baptism confirms the very existence of our souls.

Who am I and what is my relationship with God? That, friends, is the essential question of human existence. What am I, just a collection of animated chemicals that moves about for a period of years? Or, is my existence bound up to that of a creator and a creation. A creation which is well beyond my ability to understand and comprehend, but nonetheless real. No question that some people avoid or even deny addressing the question of their relationship with God all their lives. No question that some people reach bizarre and life-damaging conclusions about their relationship with God. But others, and I hope you’re one of them, seriously contemplate their lives and who God is and how they fit into God’s ideas about the universe. The Sacrament of Baptism reminds us that we are much more than flesh and bone. We are a part of the creator God.

That, friends, is why the baptism of Jesus is critical to our understanding of God. Jesus was baptized in the presence of human beings to demonstrate his own linkage with God. Now let us be clear. Neither baptism nor communion are essential to connect us with God or sustain our relationship with God. Baptism and communion are both human actions performed by humans to humans. God does not love you more because you are baptized. God is not more present in you because you take communion. God is permanently and inextricably linked to each one of us. Our task on earth is to acknowledge that we are linked to God and then live our lives in ways that serve to strengthen our relationship. Baptism and Communion are, in the words of theologian St. Augustine, “outward signs of inward grace.” It is absurd to think that God is not in relationship with a particular person simply

because she or he has not had words said and water sprinkled on them. How can human beings limit God? Likewise, taking or not taking communion neither strengthens nor diminishes the existence of our souls.

However, consider what happens when we baptize. We use water. Water is powerful. We need water to live. We need water to keep our bodies clean. We use water in so many ways it is indispensable to life as we know it.

Yet, while too little water is a bad thing, too much water is equally bad. Water is necessary to life, but water can also take away life. In the presence of too much water, we can die. Our homes and communities can be destroyed by floods. Hurricanes can alter the landscape and cause enormous destruction. Water is both life and destruction at the same time.

But isn't that the reality of our lives? I mean every day we are alive, we experience a mix of life changing situations that, like water are both good and bad. Good and bad happens to us all the time. The interesting thing about it all is that things we consider to be good when they happen don't always turn out to be good in the long run. Likewise, there are things that happen to us which we consider to be bad at the time, but may turn out to be much better than we ever expected.

That is where we find Jesus, in the water, in the swirl of events good and bad that make up our lives. Jesus was plunged into the waters of daily life and living, experiencing all the good and bad human life offers. Then Jesus emerged from the water, blessed by God and filled with the knowledge of God's Spirit working inside him.

That friends is the goal of our sacramental, spiritual life. We do these rituals not because they are written down in a prayer book or our parents did them or everyone else seems to be doing them. Far from it. Baptism and Communion exist to bring us ever closer to our relationship with God. They make us aware that God is not a disembodied entity far beyond our comprehension. No, God is here — inside of me and inside of you. We can choose to ignore God living inside of us as all of us will do. Or we can be "fired up" through the awareness of God's Holy Spirit living and working inside of us, guiding us and helping us every step of our journey through life and beyond.

How wonderful it is that the waters of baptism ignite the fire of our souls! How assuring it is that we are not alone in the world but powered by God's love and wisdom! How beautiful it is that we are bound to each other through the water, the bread, the cup, nurturing and enriching our souls!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.