

Isaiah 43:1-7 ~ Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

When You Walk Through Fire

January 13, 2019 ~ Baptism of the Lord/Reaffirmation of Baptism

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Introduction to Gospel Text:

In the story you are about to hear, where the Holy Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaims Jesus is God's Son, the early church found assurance that Jesus was the real thing. He had been infused with the Holy Spirit in a way that could actually be seen and heard by the community gathered there at the river's edge. The dove descending and the voice from heaven are two parts of this story that are described in almost exactly the same way in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke & John.

But in Luke's telling, it's all about Jesus, rather than John. It's not even explicit that John was the one who baptized him. Rather for Luke it's all about establishing Jesus' true identity and pointing ahead to the baptism of the church by fire in the flames of Pentecost. Even at the front end of Jesus' earthly ministry, Luke foreshadows the fire and water Jesus will choose to go through for all of us.

Sermon:

I guess she wanted in. We had just baptized a baby at the first service that Sunday morning, where the children from our afterschool Drama Club had performed their Christmas play as the sermon. At that moment, at least fifteen (it seemed like more) squirmy, adrenalin-filled middle school youth were huddled into the supply closet room connected to the stage where we had gathered for a pre-worship pep talk and prayer prior to our second, alternative service called "ReVive." For most of these students, it was their first time to be in a church on a Sunday morning. Wednesdays were their day. Every Wednesday they came for our afterschool drama club. But being in church on a Sunday, that was new.

Just as I was trying to quiet and focus the group, she blurted out her question with great urgency and expectation, "How much is it, to be baptized, Pastor Laurie?" No one had ever asked me this before, nor had I ever considered the idea that a baptism was something that could be purchased. I fumbled some sort of answer about how it is free and how much we would love to baptize her. But we were already late starting the service and it was time to pray.

Her question was so out of the blue. She had been born to drug addicted parents, trying her best to parent younger siblings neglected by her parents, having electric shut off over and over, she had been walking through fire her whole life. So old for her 12 years, she had already learned that everything had a price. So for her, this question was completely logical. For me, I was totally thrown off. And awakened to an entirely different perspective on this thing we call baptism.

We can't buy it. We can't earn it. That's what makes it so hard for us to get our minds around it. And it's what makes us squirm in our seats. This truth about God is uncontainable and unquenchable. No matter how hard we try. God's spirit is not a consumable item. She cannot be bought or earned or sold. Like the burning bush that Moses saw in the wilderness. The bush that was blazing but was not consumed.

This child in my drama club wanted in, but the truth for this middle school student was and is: You are already in, my child, whether you know it or not. You were born God's beloved child. That's the way God created and formed you from the beginning. God is calling you by name and claiming you as God's own. Perhaps she heard the voice from heaven for the first time that Sunday.

“Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, marked as Christ's own, forever.” These are the words the pastor says immediately following a baptism. These words proclaim to the one being baptized, “you are God's child, first and foremost.” No one and nothing can take away or diminish this truth about you. And that means that you are good. At your core you are wheat. And yes, there is that other part. There is the chaff, the bad, the evil, and the mean—in all of us. But living into our baptism, each day we can let Christ pitch the bad, the evil in us into the refining fire.

This image of Jesus, as the one coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire complete with winnowing fork in his hand, calls for a word of clarification. This wheat and chaff kind of talk that crops up in this text from John the Baptist, invites misinterpretation that can be dangerous. I do not hear John telling us that Christ labels some people as good and other people as bad. That is not it. Rather, there is good and bad, wheat and chaff, inside each of us. The purifying fire is a good thing, it is the daily flame of the Holy Spirit helping us to burn off the bad and cherish the good.

This means a couple of important things: One, we can never write off other people or ourselves. And so we must resist the impulse to sort people into two piles: good people and bad people. Jesus doesn't, nor should we. And two, “being saved” doesn't mean we can let ourselves off the hook, as though now we are somehow “done.” Yes, we are God's beloved children but that also means we are a work in progress until our dying day. And some days it feels more like regress than progress, doesn't it? This holds true for as individuals and as the church. Yes, we, the Body of Christ we call FPC, are also a work in progress, whom God shapes and refines by Holy Spirit fire, day-by-day.

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you,” wrote the prophet. Even though we are redeemed, even though we have been called by name and belong to God, let's be honest: we still let all kinds of fears grip our hearts, and sometimes destabilize

and even debilitate us. Our scripture in Isaiah, speaking to God's people who had been in exile, rings true to our experience, too. Yes, we all have fears. Big fears and little ones. Let's think for a moment, what are we most afraid of right now? We may be fearful about the health or well-being of a loved one; or about how we will pay our bills, or ever find a better job. We may have fears about our current governmental impasse over the partial government shutdown, and about the future well-being of our country. We may have deep fears about the future the sustainability of our earth. Our lists are legion. I invite you to name silently to yourself, the top two or three that come to mind...

Naming them helps to give us agency over them. Today, as we participate in the Reaffirmation of our Baptism ritual, where we touch the baptismal water and receive a verbal blessing, reclaiming our identity as God's own beloved children, I invite you to bring those fears with you to the baptismal font, and to name them silently before God, releasing them into God's care and providence, remembering the voice from heaven who says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you."

Here's the good news. Here's the wheat: God's first words to Jesus and to each of us at the beginning of each and every day, start with the clouds parting, and God calling to us: You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased. That's right. Deep inside of us, with our fears and all, we are good, because God made us that way. That is the voice to trust. Those other voices that question our value are not God. They are fake and false and need to be pitched into the unquenchable fire that John was talking about. At our core we are good and best of all: we are *not* alone. This One who made us, names us, claims us, is with us—especially when we feel like we are drowning, or like we are walking through fire.

Claiming this truth gives us the soul strength to be God's agents of Divine Love and justice. Claiming this truth frees us from the snares of all the other labels, all the other identifiers and name tags that we wear around our necks. Where we are from, what family we come from, what we do for a living, what we look like, how much money we have, what disabilities we navigate. Certainly all these things shape us, but they are all secondary. Claiming our primary identity as God's beloved child, gives us the strength to choose to walk through fire in the name of the One who went through fire and water for us.

I want to close with a story from an episode of Radiolab, told in a sermon preached by The Rev. Amy Butler, about two twenty-one year old art students, Alan Lundgard and Emilie Gassio. They were living in a loft in Brooklyn, studying art and basking in the glow of young love. They'd met at a party only nine months before, and had, as Alan describes, "a moment.., Oh yes, it was more than a thing. It was *the* thing."

One day on her way to class, Emilie was involved in a traffic accident—she was on her bike, and she was hit by a huge truck. She was then in ICU, clinging to life. Alan called Emilie’s parents to hurry to the city, where all three of them kept vigil around Emilie’s bed, her parents splitting the daytime hours and Alan staying every night, all night long.

For weeks they waited for her to recover, with few signs of hope. Finally, the doctors deemed Emilie medically stable but completely unresponsive. Against Alan’s urgent insistence, her parents agreed she was probably not getting better, so they made plans to transport her to a nursing home in their hometown, where she’d likely live the rest of her life.

But Alan thought there was hope—in the middle of what seemed to be complete desolation. In the midst of this “walking through fire” nightmare of an experience, he insisted, “She’s in there, she just can’t get out. You have to give her a chance, you have to give her a chance,” he begged. Because Emilie had sustained some hearing loss in childhood and worn hearing aids before the accident, and because the doctors thought she’d lost her vision as a result of the accident, Alan, in a desperate attempt to prove to the doctors and to Emilie’s parents that Emilie could get better, tried something he’d read about in the story of Helen Keller. He traced out on her arm the words “I love you.” She immediately awoke and responded.

Alan had proof that what he’d hoped was true. But the doctors and Emilie’s parents still weren’t sure. So Alan tried putting in her hearing aids and turning them on. When that happened, when she could finally hear, suddenly everything changed. “Just by hearing his voice...,” Emilie said, “I came back.”ⁱ

When you walk through fire, listen for that voice. When others are walking through fire, let the Holy Spirit use you to be that voice. The one that is true, the one that we all need to hear.

ⁱ Butler, Amy. “And Hear the Angels Sing,” *Journal for Preachers* Volume XLII, no. 1 (Advent 2018):9.