

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 9, 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

In my 49 years, I have found there are times when I overcomplicate things, over analyze them, make them more difficult than they need to be. Maybe it is the decision, like last week, on whether to contact Del or whomever the council president may be to decide whether or not to cancel worship.

Or maybe it's this message this morning. Why did Jesus have to get baptized? What about all this talk about winnowing forks and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire?

I fretted and fretted a lot this week over just how to explain that in the span of a handful of minutes. Yet, then the fire of Christ's love broke through those rough edges of fear, struggle, and uncertainty. The refining fire of the Spirit cast aside the angst and replaced it with confidence and clarity.

Keep it short. Keep it simple. No need to overcomplicate it this week.

There is an abundance of questions we might have with this text. Yet, there is also something very simplistic with it that we need not overcomplicate.

In the verses preceding our passage the people come out to be baptized by John to which he calls them, "a brood of vipers." He then tells them to "produce fruit" that looks like "anyone who has two shirts should share with one who has none" and "anyone who has food should do the same." Or, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely."

These words certainly must have been hard for those gathered to hear and I suspect John intended them that way. The fire of the Holy Spirit Jesus will baptize with at times cuts sharp and hard. It hits us in those places we would rather it not. Those hard places of our hearts that are simply easier to let lay dormant. It's often easier to hold onto resentment and hatred than to let go and extend forgiveness and grace. It's often easier to hold onto two shirts rather than give up one for the sake of another. It's often easier to point a finger than it is to peer back into those places within us that need refined and let the fire of Christ's love sweep away the chaff so as to make way for the wheat to grow.

Let's not overcomplicate this passage. The people came to John looking for life. They came with expectant hearts hoping for change and to be saved from their current situation and John proclaims the good news, "One who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

This fire that Jesus baptizes with is a fire of love first and foremost. It is a fire that cuts through the hardness of heart, clears away the cobwebs of hatred so that love can find a way into our hearts and into the world. A fire of love that fills with the promise of the Spirit and restores in us new and clean hearts. Is there chaff? Sure, there is. It's all that stuff that does not bear forth

life. It's all that stuff that gets in the way of us living in the abundant fruit God provides and then bearing forth the fruit in the world. Living into our calling as precious, beloved, children of God.

Luke never tells us if those gathered and heard these words threw up their hands and left. He doesn't tell us if these "brood of vipers" deemed themselves unworthy or Jesus deemed them unworthy and sent them away; but what he does tell us is, "all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized."

Despite being brood of vipers or potential fears and doubts they may not be able to produce this fruit John calls them to, it appears nonetheless they are baptized and not alone but alongside Jesus, God Son, the Beloved. Right there in the muddy, mirky waters of the Jordan the Word made flesh, the Messiah, meets them, lives with them, dwells among them, moves into the neighborhood.

Through these waters, the Spirit descends, and the Spirit of God speaks. I am still not one hundred percent sure as to exactly why Jesus needed to be baptized but what I am sure of is that I am glad he was. There's no need to overcomplicate this. Jesus was baptized. The Spirit descended upon him and assured him of who he is, God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Those gathered saw the Spirit. They heard the words. They waded in the waters with Jesus. Whatever fires of hatred, sin, scorn, and evil Jesus was about to encounter, it was the fire of love that descended upon him, the fire of love that claimed him as God's Son, the fire of love that would sustain his mission.

Let us not overcomplicate. Jesus meets us in our baptisms. The water of life, the fire of love and word of God meet us. All of this abundant goodness, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love of God work in ways we cannot fully comprehend. The Spirit descends, fills us, and refines that which is dead into life, smooths those rough edges, softens those hard places, and lights anew the fire of Christ's love that burns within us.

Like the people of Israel in their time of need, the Spirit descends upon us, and we hear words of promise, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine. Who 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. ... You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

In a sermon by Will Willimon, he tells the story of a young Canadian Lutheran saying: "The best part of being a Lutheran is baptism, when the church just tells you who you are. I've spent my whole life trying to figure out which path to take. So, at my baptism the church doused me and said, 'Here's who God meant you to be, this is the life you were created to live.'" (Pulpit Resources, JANUARY 9, 2022: HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN)

That young Lutheran is keeping it simple, not overcomplicating it. So, now let's give thanks for the gift of baptism that tells us who we are and whose we are.

THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM (ELW p. 97)

In the name of the Father,
and of the ✝ Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The presiding minister addresses the assembly.

Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism,
we are clothed with God's mercy and forgiveness.
Let us give thanks for the gift of baptism.

Water may be poured into the font as the presiding minister gives thanks.

We give you thanks, O God,
for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters
and by your Word you created the world,
calling forth life in which you took delight.

Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family.
Through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom.
At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit.
By water and your Word you claim us as daughters and sons,
making us heirs of your promise and servants of all.

We praise you for the gift of water that sustains life,
and above all we praise you for the gift of new life in Jesus Christ.
Shower us with your Spirit,
and renew our lives with your forgiveness, grace, and love.

To you be given honor and praise
through Jesus Christ our Lord
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Amen.