



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 13, 2019
ISAIAH 43:1-7; PSALM 29:1-5, 7-11; ACTS 8:14-17; LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22

PRECIOUS, HONORED AND LOVED

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."]

There's a story in my family about my birth that I first heard from my mother when I was eight years old. It turns out I was born early and unexpectedly by emergency C-section, about 7 ½ weeks before the due date. Today, with many interventions available for preterm birth,

that would not be cause for alarm; but in 1964 it was a more challenging situation.

My mother told the story this way. When I was born, my lungs were not fully developed, and I had a lot of difficulty breathing. She didn't know this because she was sedated from anesthesia, but my father was nearby in a hospital waiting

room. After I was whisked away to an incubator, the obstetrician found my father. He informed him that it was a risky situation and that the first 24 hours would be the most critical period. If I survived that, odds were good for me.

So, my father rushed to the newborn nursery and found that while he could not enter the room, he could look in from the window. He could see the incubator where I was and a bit of the baby inside. And there he stood for the first 24 hours of my life, without leaving, willing me to live.

This is the story my mother told me, in a tender and matter-of-fact voice. It was amazing to me at 8 years old; and over the years, especially when my relationship with my father was strained,

it has been a touchstone. There is a still a sense of wonder that even when I was not yet seen or known, I was precious in my father's sight, honored, and loved.

That is how the prophet Isaiah describes God's relationship with humanity in the first reading.

Isaiah is speaking to Israelites in the sixth century BCE who have been deported to Babylon after Jerusalem was sacked.

Alone and bereft, they doubt their status as God's chosen people and falter in their trust of divine love. So, Isaiah reminds them, "This is what the Lord says who created you: Do not be afraid, for I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. . . . I am the Lord your God, . . . you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

This promise of God's love and faithfulness is an ancient one, and it is the first truth affirmed in baptism. It is the promise made to each of us -- and to Edie, David and Margaret -- who will be baptized today at the 11 o'clock service. Before they were known or seen by any human being, they were beloved by God. God's grace and mercy surrounds them now and always, just as it does each of us. Nothing can or will separate us from the love of God.

Baptism does not make this happen -- it has been true since the beginning. But the sacrament makes it real because we are embodied creatures. We trust something most deeply when we can see it with our own eyes, hear it with our own ears, feel it, smell it, and taste it. And so at baptism, when we gather close to the font, see and

feel the warm water, smell the fragrant oil, and hear the ancient words that name each of these precious children as Christ's own, forever, we experience this truth at a deeper, more physical level.

Perhaps that is why the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism in bodily form, so that those gathered together can know firsthand the voice that says to Jesus "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And because they hear it for themselves, it becomes an invitation to them, too.

Although there were times that children were baptized in a private ceremony, today we intentionally baptize as part of regular Sunday worship, in community. Because the second truth affirmed in baptism is that David, Margaret and Edie are part of the larger body of Christ.

Today they are adopted into God's family, the Church, and we welcome them and promise to uphold them and their parents in their life of faith. We take pictures and sign certificates and offer congratulations and eat cake to embody the welcome and support of this community so that in the days and weeks and years ahead, they know that they do not travel alone. They are part of a family.

Baptism is always a joyful event, but it is not just a moment to celebrate and remember. It is a doorway to the spiritual journey that is the whole of our lives -- that is the third truth affirmed at baptism. The journey of faith shapes our identity as God's beloved, yes, but it also takes us through fire.

I think that is what John the Baptist means in the gospel when he says that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire and has a winnowing fork in his hand. In ancient times, the harvested, dried wheat was spread on the hard ground and beaten to crush the stalks and separate the grains from the stems. Then the whole lot was thrown up in the air with a winnowing fork so the wind could blow the dry husks to the side and reveal the fruit of the plant. Then the grains of wheat are gathered, and the chaff burned.

That's a metaphor for the spiritual journey we begin in baptism. We set out, committing ourselves to the way of love, the way that leads to justice and peace and affirms the dignity of every human being. Along the way, we realize our deep need for each other and how connected our lives are. We also come face to face with our own brokenness and that of the world. But we keep on. We ask forgiveness, we

turn to God's love, and begin again, and again, and again. We give thanks for unearned blessings by growing in compassion and putting our lives in service to others.

Can you see how this is like separating the life-giving wheat from the burdensome chaff within each of us?

The spiritual journey that begins in baptism brings us close to the Holy Spirit

and also through fire. It is not predictable or easy, but we rejoice along with the families of the newly baptized knowing that they do not need to fear. God has called them – and us – by name, and all are precious, honored, and loved.

Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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