

# Out of the Water and Into the Fire

a sermon based on

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

and delivered on

January 13, 2019

Baptism of the Lord Sunday (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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We all know about John the Baptist. He baptized Jesus. But when you think about it there's not really a whole lot about him in Scripture. Luke's Gospel probably has the most telling us about the angel's announcement to Zechariah that he would have a son and name him John, and the child's joyful jump in Elizabeth's womb when Mary came to visit. We hear about his beheading by the "reluctant" Herod. But the only thing we hear about John in all four Gospels is that as he was baptizing people – he baptized Jesus.

What we often overlook when we hear him say "I baptize with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worth to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire," (Lk 3:16) – what we often overlook is **why** he makes that statement. It doesn't just come out of the blue. He makes that point because as the passage says, "the people were filled with expectation, and questioning in their hearts concerning (him), whether he might be the Messiah." (Lk 3:15) Why? Why were their hearts filled with expectation concerning him?

Scripture tells us that John was the one to prepare the way and make straight the path of the Lord. All four Gospels tell us that. (Mt 3:3, Mk 1:3, Lk 3:4, Jn 1:23) So what was it about him that got everyone so excited? We don't usually get excited about "preparations" except for what we anticipate coming later. Maybe that's it. Maybe they really didn't grasp that there was more needed.

The fact that John tells them that he only baptizes with water, but that the one who will come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, sort of reveals where their expectations were limited. Bear with me.

John's baptism – the baptisms that John did – were baptisms of repentance for forgiveness. But that was it. Washing with water can clean off the outside. It can take away the coat of filth that builds up on the outside to make us look presentable. That's a good thing. When we are forgiven through grace we are presentable to God, but there's something more. Even John recognized that even a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sin was incomplete.

Then Jesus came. "I'm not worthy," John says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (and) Jesus answer(s) him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." (Mt 3:14-15) But why is it proper? Jesus didn't need to repent of any sin. Jesus didn't need to be forgiven. So what was the purpose of him being baptized by John?

Why is it only after he emerges from the water that the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, and the voice from heaven proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."? (Lk 3:22) Why now? When Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her that her son, Jesus, would be called, "Son of the Most High." (Lk 1:32) When Mary scolded him for scaring she and Joseph after he wandered off, he asked them why they should be dismayed, stating that they should have known he would be in his father's house. (Lk 2:49) Why now? And why not anyone else?

Part of it – I think – for everyone else is that they felt better about themselves. John baptized them and they felt better for presenting themselves for baptism. But they weren't really changed. Don't get me wrong. I think that most were sincere in their repentance – in their intention to turn around their lives. But they – like many of us, sometimes – thought that was enough. But it was only Jesus, the one who had no sin to be washed away – the only one who didn't need to repent, upon whom the Holy Spirit descended with that heavenly voice proclaiming "You are my Son."

Why did Jesus even need to be baptized? What was different that God blessed him?

It should be obvious, in Jesus, God came to live as one of us. In Jesus, God owned every bit of what it meant to be human. He even experienced death. Although Jesus didn't sin, in claiming the human need for repentance and forgiveness as his own – the one who's humanity

had only been “shortchanged” – if you will – by not sinning, in baptism he claimed his full humanity and purpose – to which the Father responds, “You are my Son... I am pleased.”

It’s only after this – it’s only after his baptism – that Jesus starts to do the miracles that we know. It’s only after his baptism that he begins his ministry. But for him there was another turn.

People were filled with expectation about John, because they felt good about themselves after being baptized. It didn’t go so easy for Jesus. After he was baptized, the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness outside of Jordon where he would spend forty days fasting – and where the devil would come to tempt him. After **his** baptism, the scribes and leaders in the temple who were so impressed by the wisdom of the twelve-year-old Jesus, turned against him. After his baptism the people of his home town rejected him – even after they waited with anticipation for this son of Nazareth whom they known and like anticipating the hometown boy made good. After his baptism, even a friend would betray him so that he would be tortured and hung on a cross to die.

Even those things we celebrate brought scandal. Simon, the Pharisee, questioned his morality, when the woman whom Jesus had healed and forgiven, dropped on her knees and washed his feet with her tears and hair. (Lk 7:36-39) People scoffed when he invited himself to a tax collector’s home, after seeing Zacchaeus’ longing.

When Jesus came to be baptized by John it wasn’t just to feel good about himself. When Jesus came to be baptized by John it was so because that was who he was, and because he wanted each of us to hear that voice from heaven that says, “You are mine. You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

That water baptism didn’t change him. It confirmed who he was. And it made him a target for the devil.

In the rite for the Sacrament of Baptism in our hymnal and Book of Worship, the first question that is asked – whether to the candidate or parents – is “Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil power of this world, and repent of your sin?” followed next by “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” These questions represent the legacy in the Church in which baptism is preceded by an exorcism.

I’ve been challenged when I point that out – including by colleagues – who question why a baby would need exorcism. But those challenges are based on a misunderstanding. Exorcism isn’t just about casting out demons – but about rejecting their power. That’s important in the context of Christian baptism, because in Christian baptism, we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In Christian baptism, we become sons and daughters of God the Father and brothers and sisters of our Lord, Jesus Christ. That puts a target on us. That’s why as a pastor I don’t baptize children who aren’t going to be raised in the fellowship of the church – the community of Jesus’ disciples – where they can learn to stand up temptation. Because it’s in our community that we are strengthened to find our hope in God when we’re so hungry that even rocks look tasty. It’s in the community of faith that we find strength to resist the temptation to give it all up and jump so that God will do what he will. It’s in the community of faith that we find the promise that God will lead us in a better way.

That same God, who called Jesus his Son, the beloved – that same God shows us in that Jesus that we are his beloved and that he wants us to be his sons and daughters. That same God, who lived in Jesus and made him holy – invites us to be holy. That same God calls us to realize that our baptism is about more than John’s.

Let's think about it this way, when we think about Jesus as the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, as opposed to simple water baptism. Let's think about it like cooking. What's the first thing you do when cooking potatoes? You wash them, right? You rub off all the dirt. They look better. But at the same time, the anti-nutrients in them can only be removed by cooking. Raw, they're edible, but not nutritious. Or let's think about other foods, in which the heat – the fire of cooking kills any unseen pathogens. What I'm getting at here, is that cooking – the application of fire - changes the nature of the food.

Jesus invites us to have our nature changed. He invites us to be transformed. That means that we will face challenges and hardship in life. But he also promises that through him – and through the Body of Christ that is his Church – that those challenges will help to drive out impurities and that he will guard us against being burned.

Let us move away from the water and into the fire. Let each of us claim the promise of God not just to feel good about ourselves, but to be sanctified and transformed in his image. AMEN.