

Pastor's Message – 1/19/25  
Isaiah 43:1-2 (3-7)  
Luke 3:15-17, 20-22

In my Message last week, I asked the question, “When do you think the human Jesus became aware that he was set apart and chosen by God to be the Messiah? Was it at his birth or even before? Was it when Mary and Joseph presented him at the Temple and Simeon and Anna recognized God’s Spirit in him? Was it when he lingered behind in Jerusalem to ask questions for three days during his visit to Jerusalem for Passover at the age of twelve?

Our Gospel reading today relates one of those possible occasions. Jesus comes to John to be baptized, the heavens opened, a dove descends, and a voice from heaven says, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.” (3:22).

Jesus then goes to the synagogue at Nazareth, opens the scroll and reads from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He makes this audacious statement in His hometown synagogue and His *peeps* cannot/will not accept that He can be the Messiah. Shortly, following this event, Jesus goes to a wedding party and turns water into wine. Does that make Him a miracle worker or a magician?

So, who is this Jesus whom we worship and promise to serve and follow?

Today He offers a baptism by the Spirit and by fire. Everywhere He went, Jesus was a troublemaker and antagonized people and got under their skin. Finally, just before Lent, we’ll see Him up on a mountain with Moses and Elijah: with clothes and face shining. A voice will be heard, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”

Jesus will ask His disciples just six chapters from now, in Luke 9:20, “Who do people say that I am?” That question is just as relevant today as it was then. Who do you say that Jesus is? Your answer will dictate how you live your lives. Every day is an opportunity to reflect on that question, to examine your faith and recommit yourself to following Jesus. If you take that question seriously, you can expect to grow and to be changed.

Our starting point today is baptism: baptism with water, baptism with fire and baptism with the Holy Spirit. This year, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, I’m being led to talk about the middle one. Many, perhaps most, churches do baptism with water. The latter two are reserved for Jesus.

You’ve heard of a “baptism by fire”? That’s a Jesus baptism. No sprinkling of water. No immersion. In fact, no water at all. When Jesus baptizes, it’s with the rush of gale force wind that’s the power of God’s energy coming to stir up everything. Jesus baptizes with a fire that burns away the chaff of life. The unnecessary parts are incinerated. Gone are the addictions that devour. Greed and pride and arrogance and violence become a pile of ash.

The imagery of water, wind, and fire here is far from comforting. This is no “Hallmark moment.” It is, instead, in line with moments of “Holy Spirit-possession” described

throughout the Bible. “The wind blows where it will, and you hear its sound, but you have no idea where it came from or where it’s going. This is how it will be with all those born of water and Spirit” (John 3:8). This is what is at stake when we are baptized with water, Holy Spirit, and fire.

Water baptisms are comforting and welcoming; a real time for celebration, except when water threatens drowning. No one looks forward to a baptism by fire. It’s human nature to run the other way, to delay, to hope it will pass by. But a word from the LORD through the prophet reminds us that believers do not have to fear either drowning or burning. Isaiah speaks of protection through waters and rivers and wildfires.

The prophet Isaiah declares powerfully that God is out to save God’s people. That salvation there and then (deliverance from exile) involved crossing a desert with few oases, fording rivers where there were no bridges, and braving wildfires where there were no fire departments to extinguish them. Deliverance then and there—the actual return from Babylon to Judea—concretely meant those returning home would very likely face all these things.

These were serious obstacles. And the word of the Lord is “This is part of my redemption, and I am with you.” They were thus at once obstacles but also pathways of redemption.

Early Christians claimed the same things around this text and their understanding and practice of baptism. The process of deliverance included such ordeal. The process of preparing for baptism came to take at least three years by the second century, three years of trial in learning how to live in the community and the way of Jesus before they ever experienced baptism much less ever witnessed Holy Communion. Early Methodists had a similar experience --- a six-month period of working in a trial class meeting to make measurable progress in living into the General Rules before being admitted into the Methodist Society. Why? Because they wanted to make sure people were ready to live the covenant they would make.

Every time we reaffirm the baptismal covenant, we’re saying we want to do that, too. The question is whether and how we actually do. Deserts, rivers, and wildfires in the baptismal journey are both obstacles and pathways. Baptism is a serious and life-changing decision and event: for the individual if they are of age, for the parents and family of an infant or child and for the Church that makes promises to help the baptized person live out and grow in their faith.

There are obstacles to living out our faith; there are obstacles to even deciding to believe in and follow Jesus. Water, wind, and fire are nearly everywhere here, presented consistently as powerful forces far beyond human control. Giving ourselves over to God, being given into baptism, is to be given over to God’s power known in water, Spirit, and fire.

Time after time, whether by prophet or angel or by Jesus Himself, the word is given “Be not afraid.” Not that there is nothing to be afraid of – even the things that threaten to consume us. These are the kinds of problems that eat away at us, ravage us, reduce us to mere ashes of our former selves. These are the burdens that cause our souls to waste away, transform us into hollow shells of what we once were. These are the fires of life. It’s the burning, searing pain that seems beyond bearing.

God's word to us is that when there is such destruction in our lives, if we feel as though everything around us has turned to ashes — then we can rejoice, because God says that he is nearby. That fire — whatever it is — won't consume us. We're redeemed.

There are the things that threaten to overwhelm us. This is the stress, perhaps from multiple sources, that slowly rises like a flood, until there is scarcely any breathing room left. This is when the marriage, the children, the career all conspire to overwhelm us with burdens, decisions and anxiety.

God's word to us is that if there's a flood; if the rivers rise and rage; if the waters of calamity flood our lives, making us feel as if we'll just about drown if things get worse, then rejoice, for you know that God is with us. We will not be overwhelmed. We're redeemed.

And that's not all.

We are "precious;" we are "honored;" we are "loved" (v. 4).

We'll pass through the fire unburned. We'll walk through the flood unharmed because God is with us, making it impossible for the fires and floods of life to lay a hand on our souls.

To travel from the United States to Canada, most people take a road. Some cross a bridge. Back in June of 2012, Nik Wallenda of the "Flying Wallendas" walked across Niagara Falls on a tightrope. Millions watched. The crossing was broadcast by ABC on live television, so millions more were able to listen to the prayers he said into a microphone as he made his way across. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you," says God through the prophet Isaiah, "and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (43:2).

The exact words from Isaiah say that we don't have it so easy. We don't get to cross *above* the water, but must pass *through* the water. In fact, Wallenda didn't pass *through* the thundering waters of Niagara Falls, since he surely would have been knocked from his high wire and overwhelmed by the force of the falls. Instead, he passed over and *above* the waters, praying all the way.

Emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, however, he was in a very real sense "passing through the waters." His passage was a tightrope terror.

We know what this feels like, don't we? At times, each of us is going to face what seems like an insurmountable obstacle. Passing a difficult test in school. Running a marathon. Getting dumped by a romantic partner. Surviving cancer. Raising teenagers. Being fired. Changing careers. Experiencing the death of a spouse.

Some people turn and run away. They drop the class, abandon their athletic training, avoid romantic relationships, ignore the cancer, retreat from their children, fall into a midlife career crisis or refuse to face their grief. When the waters are raging, this is understandable.

But ultimately self-destructive.

Those who retreat from the edge are ignoring the promise of God: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." Both parts of this verse are equally true. Isaiah says, "*When* you pass through the waters" ... not "*If* you pass through the waters." We are all going to face the terror of raging waters. It is absolutely guaranteed.

But, if God should give us a tightrope, here are some tips for using it.

*Tightrope Tip No. 1: Remember that this is in your blood.* God has called us by name, and made us his own. This ability to pass through the waters, well, it runs in the family.

*Tightrope Tip No. 2: As the water roars around you, remember to pray.* Give thanks and praise to Jesus every step of the way.

*Tightrope Tip No. 3: Keep an eye on your footing,* even when there is chaos all around you. "I am the LORD your God," says God through the prophet Isaiah, "the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (v. 3). If you lose your connection to your Savior, you are certainly going to fall.

*Tightrope Tip No. 4: Accept the safety line offered by God.* Fortunately, we have been given a safety line because some of life's most daunting challenges are going to knock us off our feet. God offers a similar safety line through the prophet Isaiah. "Because you are precious in my sight," says God, "and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life" (v. 4). God makes a serious investment in the safety of his people, saying to the Israelites that he has paid a ransom of entire nations to buy them back from slavery. This is similar to the safety harness God offers us in the New Testament, when Jesus tells us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

*Tightrope Tip No. 5: Remember that you are blessed.* The God of all creation has given you the gift of life, and he says to you, "Do not fear, for I am with you" (v. 5). Even when circumstances threaten to overwhelm you, God promises you his presence and his power.

*Tightrope Tip No. 6: Know that even in the face of the most insurmountable obstacles, you do not walk alone.* Your ancestors in the faith are at your side, and God promises to "bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth -- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (vv. 6-7).

If we are going to be disciples of Jesus and we are going to be a church of Jesus, we must expect and choose a baptism of water and fire. If we are going to choose to live out the call and command of Jesus, we are going to experience resistance: from others and even from our own fears and lethargy and sinfulness. Forces of earth and forces from beneath the earth will stand in our way.

Baptism, in all its forms and actual vows and symbolism, is a revolutionary act, a treasonous act. Its vows demand we take sides, pledge allegiance against the claims of every other reign but God's. Baptism means that we're embracing as of first importance not ourselves or even each other but rather God and then each other as partners with God to enact the repentance and change that God's kingdom both demands and makes possible.

In baptism, the Holy Spirit and fire purifies us. In baptism, the Holy Spirit possesses us. In baptism, water surrounds us and the Holy Spirit becomes our very breath. In baptism, water buries us and our former allegiances and Holy Spirit raises us to newness of life pledged to God's kingdom alone. In baptism, water refreshes us and Holy Spirit and fire drive us to places we may never have imagined we would go.

Trouble will come whether we deserve it or not; sometimes we will invite trouble by choosing to follow Jesus and do what He expects us to do. Following Jesus as disciples and being a church of Jesus may not be an easy road, but we have a promise from God that He will always be with us: protecting us and guiding us. God offers promises, fire, water, but also, redemption.