

Sermon
January 12, 2024

Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Psalm 29

Today's readings are about baptism and being filled with the Holy Spirit. Experiences which all of us know something about. Whether it is our own baptism or someone else's, We all have a story to tell.

I was baptized in my mother's church-the presbyterian church. I was a child, probably about 6 years of age. I remember enjoying it, dressed in my Easter finery, and feeling very holy. It was a sprinkling of water baptism.

Now as you all know baptism is a one-and-done sort of affair. One need not be baptized twice. But that said when I became really active in the Catholic Newman Center as a student at UC Berkeley the priests offered me the opportunity to be baptized again. I am not sure if they thought that the sprinkling of water was insufficient in general or that I personally could use with a bit more soaking in Holy Water. But one thing led to another, and I was baptized on a warm Easter Evening in an outdoor stone pool, --full immersion, the choir singing, the musicians playing, and the sky above torn open and full of brightly blazing stars. My heart burned with the Holy Spirit as only a young 20-year-old Christian's heart can blaze with Spirit-filled conviction.

It was our readings today that made me think back to my baptisms. About water and holy spirit.

The Gospel of Luke opens today with John the baptizer (JBap) appearing in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The people who have come to see and hear the words of John are a bit confused as to his prophetic role.

They are wondering if this prophet and Holy Man might be the Messiah they have longed for.

John is quick to tell his listeners that he is not the Messiah, there is one to come that is "more powerful than he, greater in stature,

"I have baptized you with water," says John; "but the one to come, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

And in John the Baptist style he continues: Of the messiah that is to come he decries, "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."

John, bless his heart, is using the prophetic language of his time. But too he is yet to understand the full message of Jesus's ministry. He has yet to understand that Jesus brings the Good News of a merciful and loving God. A God that does not relate to his beloved through a punitive relationship, but rather through Grace. In Grace, we are given a patient God.

I can hear Jesus taking John aside and saying, "Yes, sure we are like wheat collected by God, But John, no chaff, no burning to bits in unquenchable fire. Grace John. We are collected and nurtured by Grace.

All four of the Gospels record the baptism of Jesus by JBap in the Jordan River. The stories are all little different, in that they highlight different aspects of the story depending on what aspect of the baptism the gospel writers wanted to emphasize to their listeners.

Luke's retelling of this event emphasizes Relationship-Jesus's relationship with God and his relationship with us. We read: "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. "

It doesn't get better than this.

Jesus waits in line to be baptized. Others are baptized first, He waits with humility in line. The message here is that when we go in to be baptized, he comes on into the water with us. And in this story, he is in the baptism with everyone present that day. The heavens open, and a voice from Heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. "

This is not the voice of a wrathful God. This is not a God that proclaims Okay you are baptized. Now go out and do what needs to be done. You are on your own. Don't mess up.

Luke tells us that after Jesus was baptized, he prayed. His baptism brought him closer to God. Closer into relationship with God. And I daresay closer to the those with whom he was baptized.

In the church, we don't have private baptisms anymore. Because baptisms are about becoming part of a community. When we became baptized, we became part of God's larger Christian community of believers. And yes, it's quite a mixed community. But we are bonded together in love. Love that is hard to express sometimes, hard to hold onto sometimes. But a love that must be steadfast and forgiving. It is a love that binds to one other solidly, but also lightly enough for the Holy Spirit to bring in the messages of God. These are messages that God wants us to hear in our personal lives and our communal lives.

Prepare the way for the Holy Spirit, for Jesus, the Messiah. Luke tells us to open our hearts and minds so that we might hear a voice in our wilderness. To make straight a path in our

lives so that we are available to God, to the wisdom of Jesus. And to prepare the way so that we might be ignited by the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' baptism and in our baptism he and we are joined in a holy communion. When we experience Jesus' baptism with him, and we go down into the depths of that Holy water we too can experience the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit filling our souls.

In water and Holy Spirit, we are made family, beloved members of God's family. And God is well pleased.

Amen