

Sermon XXXII. 02.
6th Sunday of Easter
Adult Baptism
5 May 2024

Holy Spirit and Fire

Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire...”
Luke 3:16b (NRSV)¹

When you and I hear the word “Fire” – for many of us **alarm** or **concern** – perhaps even **fear** – may be our immediate reaction. “Fire” (for example) is not a word that any of us should shout in a crowded room or theatre – unless the peril of it is imminent.

A house fire...a towering inferno...or a massive, fast-moving wild fire – like the one that swept through Maui, and parts of the West – as seen on the evening news...is a cause for great concern...with the injury, death and destruction it often brings to those who are trapped therein.

Of course there are exceptions....like “chestnuts roasting on an open fire”...(as we sing at Christmas)... Or, a small warm fire in the hearth at home on a wintry night... Even singing around a camp fire conjures up pleasant images of this essential element of the natural world.

But often fire stirs our hearts to be aware or mindful of its potential for destruction. And this is true even in the Bible...especially in descriptions of fire...and its use by God.

Have you ever heard of ‘hell-fire and damnation’?

Do you remember stories of fire being sent-down from heaven...

Whether it be to places like *Sodom and Gomorrah*, to destroy the citizens there...²

Or perhaps the fire that the prophet Elijah called-down on the altar at Mount Carmel, that destroyed the prophets of Baal?³

Fire – divine fire that is – was often a means used by God to execute judgment against...and punishment to...those who stood against the ways of God and his people.

I

But fire can also serve as a cleansing agent and purpose as well...*Can it not?* Not only is the heat of fire used to purify and sterilize instruments for surgery and other purposes... Fire has also served as a catalyst for new life.

I was once walking – hiking actually – through a vast timberland and forest glade in the Appalachian Mountains. As it happens, the previous year a horrendous wildfire had swept through the area...killing nearly everything in its path...massive trees, shrubs, and undergrowth in the forest.

But on this early summer day I was treated to a wondrous sight. The ground was covered with new growth...plants, even wildflowers, and new trees that were beginning to sprout in the warm sun...a 'flor abunda'.

The fire – even as devastating as it once was – in nature's way had provided a means for new growth and vegetation to sprout forth and thrive.

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."⁴

So John told the expectant crowd that had gathered along the river... People who were eager to see and to meet a long-awaited Messiah...who was drawing near. And those of us who know a little about Church in general – and maybe baptism in particular – may have some idea to what the old 'Baptizer' was referring.

Do you remember the story of Pentecost? You will celebrate it here, in just two weeks! Who of us can forget that amazing story of how the Holy Spirit was given to the earliest Church? And what was the distinguishing feature of that 50th Day after Easter and Passover...when the disciples of Jesus had gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem? *Do you remember?*

There was the sound of a mighty wind, of course, that shook the whole house! But then what?

“Divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.”⁶

And that’s when these followers were filled with the Holy Spirit... *Weren’t they?* And given the ability to speak all sorts of foreign languages...without so much as a ‘crash course’ in...French...or Spanish...or Swahili!

They were ‘baptized’ with the Holy Spirit and with fire...
as old John had once predicted at a river nearby!

II

And the same is true for our baptism... No, I’m not suggesting we have ‘fire extinguishers’ on hand when we gather-round the baptismal font! But, we should be ready for the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit to be at work...as the Spirit covers the face of the waters.

What did the Spirit do at Jesus’ baptism...probably when he arose from the waters of the Jordan...perhaps in the outstretched arms of his cousin, John? *Were you listening?*

“...the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”⁷

And that’s when a voice from above made the pronouncement of who Jesus was for all to hear.

“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased.”⁸

III

Okay, so what does it mean for us? Some may even wonder... *Why should we be baptized?* Or, in the case of most of us here at Campbell (I suspect)...*Why is it important for us to know and realize that we are baptized?*

Baptism is about what God has done for you...in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Baptism is a sign and seal of our rebirth as a member of the family of God...with Christ as our elder brother.

In **baptism**, we remember and celebrate that we belong to God.

There's not a thing in this world that can change the fact that you – who are baptized – are a part of the family of God.

But that's not all... **Baptism** is also transformative. In baptism, we are not the same people we once were. Simply because God is – and remains so – a significant part of our lives... through the power of the Holy Spirit.

No... That doesn't mean we won't make mistakes. **No...** We are not made to be sinless because we are baptized. **No...** That's why we come back here – week after week for most of us – and confess our sins before God and each other. Like our prayer this morning:

“We have failed to bear the fruit of repentance, but have been worthless chaff, good for nothing.”

Now *that's* uplifting!

But did you hear what John said to the people about the Christ, before many of them were baptized?

“His winnowing fork is in his hand...to gather the wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”⁹

Now that's not a pleasant sight, mind you... But that's what the Holy Spirit does – and *can* do – when we come to be...and also remember that we are...baptized. That God is not through with any of us, yet.

God comes to us with the cleansing fire of his Holy Spirit to transform and to make us into the people we are created in his image to be.

IV

Today, we celebrate **Miles'** baptism, as we remember the baptism of Jesus...

And the fact that we are baptized.”

So you are...

So are we!

The baptism that Jesus brings can cleanse us of that which is sinful – like a cleansing fire – and fills us with the holy way and Spirit of God.

There’s a holy fire that is burning for those who love God – passionately. You are called by name by the God who made you.¹⁰ And we yearn to share – as those who are baptized in God’s name – in a life-long journey with him.

W. Clay Macaulay, guest pulpit supply
Second Presbyterian Church
Petersburg, Virginia

Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² See Genesis 19:12-29.

³ See 1 Kings 18:20-46.

⁴ Luke 3:16b, **The New Oxford Annotated Bible** – *New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 82 NT.

5 See Acts 2:1-21 ff.
6 Acts 2:3.

7 Luke 3:22a.
8 Luke 3:22b.

9 From Luke 3:17.

10 See Isaiah 43:1.