

Sunday, January 12, 2025
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord (Year C)

Isaiah 43.1-7; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/918485927111597>

(Sermon begins at about 19:35)

“Fire and the Waters of Baptism”

Thus says the LORD,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.

These words from our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah, first spoken in the mid sixth century BC, transcend time: extending from long before they were spoken, back to the time of the Exodus, forward to the Babylonian Exile, to the time of Jesus, to where we find ourselves today. They similarly transcend space, extending from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, to the Promised Land, to Babylon, to the Jordan River, to Southern California. They encompass a multitude of peoples from the Hebrews seeking liberation from slavery, to Jews both in exile in Babylon and those remaining in Israel, to those coming to the wilderness to be baptized in the Jordan River, to the people of a variety of faith traditions who call Los Angeles home. Speaking words of comfort and assurance, of hope and promise, to Jews and Christians alike, and even to those who believe in other deities or no deity at all.

This oracle delivered by the Prophet are words of promise to God’s people that they will be restored from Exile. Those in exile in Babylon will return to their home in Israel, will be reunited with those who have remained behind. They will, once again, be made whole as a people. To convey this promise, God uses words that are an allusion to the Exodus: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” Just as centuries before the Hebrews passed through the waters of the Red Sea gaining freedom from captivity in Egypt, once again the people will be liberated, this time from the oppression of the Babylonians. Once again, they will be free. The oracle does not just promise restoration. It also is an expression of solidarity. These words provide assurance that God will be with his people throughout, caring for them, supporting them, protecting them, comforting them.

Our Gospel reading similarly is about passing through waters of a different sort: the waters of baptism. Passing through waters that, likewise, are a promise of and a means to restoration. To restoration of our relationship with God and with one another. We hear Luke’s account of John the Baptist performing baptisms at the Jordan River, with his own twist on the act. Baptism was

a Jewish rite typically reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism. The convert was immersed in water as a sign of repentance. This was not just an expression of regret or remorse for one's sins. It was more than that. The word translated as "repentance" is the Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means "change of mind." *Metanoia* was understood to be a complete change of heart or change of life. A complete reorientation of one's life. A turning around. A turning away from one's old way of life and entering into a new life in alignment with Jewish laws and customs.

As I said, John performed baptism with a twist. The twist was that John was not just baptizing Gentile converts. He was calling all people to repentance, to a reorientation of their life, Gentile and Jew alike. He recognized that no matter who we are, no matter what faith tradition we profess, we all fall short. His baptism was a sacramental way of calling all to turn around and return to the path God desires for each of us.

Even so, John recognizes that, while the baptism he performs has value, there is one who will provide a baptism that is even more life-changing: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." He then provides an analogy to further explain what this means: "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." Some pretty sobering, even scary, imagery. An image sometimes taken to mean that some will be included, the wheat; and some will be excluded, the chaff. And that the chaff, those who are excluded, will be burned "with unquenchable fire," will be condemned to Hell. Not so. That could not be farther from the truth. The imagery of the winnowing fork, the wheat, and the chaff refers to a process used in the harvesting of wheat. One that continues to be used to this day in some form or fashion. Grains of wheat have an outer husk which protects the grain. The husks, collectively known as chaff, need to be removed to get to the grain. With the use of a winnowing fork to toss the wheat in the air, the chaff is blown off and the usable grain remains. The chaff, which is useless, is then burned.

In the winnowing process, the goal is not to separate good grain from bad grain, but rather separate the useless chaff from the valuable grain. The goal is to preserve every grain of wheat. As applied to God's people, John recognizes that each of us is in need of coming to God for restoration and liberation. The winnowing is therefore an analogy for allowing God to remove whatever it is about us that gets in the way of our relationship with God: our anxieties, self-centeredness, greed, apathy, or whatever it may be. To allow the wind of the Spirit to blow those things away, to fall by the wayside and be burned away. Revealing and preserving the essence of who we are as God's beloved children. Freeing us to live into the fullness of who God created and calls us to be. Restoring us to the fullness of who God created and calls us to be.

After making his statement about what Jesus, the Messiah, will accomplish, we are told that that same Messiah was also baptized. A surprising turn of events. If he is the one who will bring about our transformation, removing the chaff and revealing the inner core of who we are—a transformation that is symbolized by baptism—why on earth does HE need to be baptized? And this is obviously not some special version of baptism just for Jesus. We are told that "when all

the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized . . .” No, his baptism was the same as everyone else’s. Performed in the context of others being baptized.

Just as our baptisms are the means by which we are transformed to live into the fullness of who we are created and called to be, so too was Jesus’ baptism a sign of the fullness of who he was created and called to be. As one commentator so beautifully characterizes why Jesus was baptized:

It’s an expression of the astonishing humility and solidarity of the Incarnation: in Jesus, God comes alongside us, even to the point of joining in a rite of repentance and renewal. And it’s a powerful reminder that arrogance has no place in Christian discipleship. If even Jesus gladly undergoes a rite of conversion, how much more should Christians live humble, unpretentious lives of ongoing conversion. Indeed, following Jesus means setting out with him on this path of humility and solidarity, confession and grace, a way of love with which God is “well pleased.”¹

Jesus’ baptism, along with so many others that day, along with so many of us through the ages, is a sign of solidarity. That God through Christ is in solidarity with all his people. A solidarity entered into with humility and with grace. Our own baptisms are invitations to participate more fully in what that solidarity means in tangible ways in our own lives and ministries. To demonstrate in our own lives the same solidarity, humility, and grace that God exhibited in the Incarnation by coming among us in the flesh. To demonstrate in our own lives the same solidarity, humility, and grace that Jesus exhibited in being baptized along with so many others. To demonstrate in our own lives the same solidarity, humility, and grace that Christ exhibited in his life and ministry.

As the Body of Christ, this is who we are called to be. But it is in times of crisis, more than ever, that we are specifically called to demonstrate the solidarity, humility, and grace God first showed us, that God first shared with us. It is not lost on me, and perhaps you as well, that our primary readings for this day—readings that are set-in our lectionary, over which I have no choice—contain images of fire. The words of God spoken through the Prophet Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Words of promise that no matter what we face, God is with us. And the words of John the Baptist, speaking of Jesus, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Holy words in a context of the promise of protection and restoration, of renewal and transformation. Fire being an image for, the means to, restoration, renewal, and transformation. Holy words and images delivered while seemingly unquenchable fires rage virtually in our backyard. Words that currently seem hollow and meaningless for those tragically affected by those fires.

While we take comfort on the meaning of the words of Scripture we heard this morning, we must be mindful of those who do not even have the opportunity to hear those words in their own churches. The people of St. Mark’s Parish in Altadena, which burned down this week. The people of St. Matthew’s Parish in Pacific Palisades, which is in an evacuation zone. And

numerous other houses of worship, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, that have been destroyed or which are currently inaccessible to them. All unable to hear words of comfort from their pulpits.

We are still in the early days of the devastation of the fires raging around Los Angeles. We have already witnessed devastation of historic proportions. And sadly, it will only get worse before it's over. For some who are directly affected, the nightmare will never be over, not really. And even for those who are not directly affected, there will be long-term impacts: to the already overburdened housing market, to the economy of the region, just to name the most obvious. At this point, we cannot know the full extent of the destruction or of the ongoing impacts. Only time will tell. All we can say at this point is that what we are witnessing on the news is a life-changing event for many, if not all, of us who call the LA Basin home.

What we can say with certainty is that the people of this region are in need of experiencing God's love more than ever. The people of this region are in need of hearing words of God's promise of protection and restoration, of renewal and transformation. As those who are the Body of Christ, as those who have come through Christ's winnowing process, as those who have come through the waters of baptism, we are called to stand in solidarity with all who are hurting and in need of the assurance of God's love. We are called to proclaim the Gospel in word and most certainly in action, to our siblings who are broken and hurting in ways most of us cannot even imagine. That they, too, may eventually, through God's grace and healing, be restored and renewed. That they may be able to walk through the fire, that they may be able to pass through the waters, to the new life God promises for all his beloved children.

¹ "Jesus Also: SALT's Commentary for Jesus' Baptism," SALT, January 7, 2025.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/7/jesus-also-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-two>.