

## Sermon: Water and Fire

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When was the last time you held a winnowing fork in your hand? When was the last time you have stepped onto a threshing floor, or gathered wheat into a granary? I must admit, at least for me, I have never done that, and I suspect for most of you, it is the same.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are gathered here today, to reflect on the Baptism of the Lord, through the Lectionary passage of Luke 3, and in so doing, we are called also to remember our own baptism.

The text in Luke brings us to the shore of the river Jordan, where people from Jerusalem and from all over the Judean countryside were gathered. They were filled with anticipation, that God was about to do something, something new, something wonderful. Perhaps as the Prophet Isaiah had prophesied, to rend the heaven and come down. Their expectation naturally fell on John the baptizer, this unknown boundary figure, coming out of the wilderness, eating locust and honey, preaching repentance and the kingdom, and baptizing all with water from the river Jordan.

Water is an element essential to life. The significance of water is highlighted for people living in a region of Israel and Palestine, where water is scarce and drought a constant threat to life. We find more than six hundred references to water in the Bible, organized roughly in three main categories—as a cosmic force that only God can command and control, as a source of life, and as a cleansing agent. We first come across the phrase ‘water of the deep’ in Genesis 1, symbolizing the primordial power of chaos that was overcome by the wind (or Spirit) from God. The Flood narrative a bit later in Genesis 6-8 reveals to us the truly awesome and destructive power of water, a source of not life but death, yet also a way to cleanse the earth of the wickedness of humanity. The power of water is truly in the domain of God.

A number of years ago, Daisy and I weren't doing particularly well. The boys were a handful, the stress of ministry was impacting our family life in a not so positive way, and Daisy was, in my not-so-clinical assessment, depressed.

She came to me with an ask: that she want to see and touch an ocean. We were living in Montreal back then, and the closest ocean, the Atlantic, was hundreds of miles away, Furthermore it was during the dead of winter (as I recall right after the busy Christmas season back then), and the water of the St. Lawrence river was just not going to suffice. (I tried to convince her that St. Lawrence seaway is kind-of-like sea water, but she didn't buy what I was selling)

So we drove down to the U.S., passed Boston, headed towards Cape Cod, and booked a hotel at the very tip of the peninsula, a hotel surrounded by the water of the Atlantic on three sides. That hotel was supposed to be a summer destination, an immense complex with fabulous beaches and swimming pool, and for whatever reason, it was still open during winter, even though very few people were staying there. So there we were, Daisy and I and the two boys were staying in this deserted wing of the hotel, with nobody around—reminiscent of the movie *The Shining*, by Jack Nicholson—and we had a blast.

Yes we eventually went out onto the beach, a frozen landscape, and ventured to the edge of of water, with frigid wind blasting at our faces, waves after waves rolling inshore. We touched the ocean, and Daisy was satisfied. Even till this day, she could not explain fully why she needed to see, feel and touch an ocean back then, but only that she did, and was glad to have done so.

For my part, I was glad that God had separated the water from the land, and fixed a limit for it, and as in Job 38:11, God said, “This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt.”

Coming back to John the baptizer on the shore of the river Jordan. The people were filled with expectation that he was the long awaited Messiah, the one to deliver Israel from bondage and oppression, the one to usher in the kingdom of God. But John answered all of them by saying, “*I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*”

Let us hold our thoughts on the Holy Spirit for now and focus first on fire. Fire, like water, is another elemental force with destructive power, yet within it the power to cleanse and to renew. These past few day, through footages on TV and online, we have come to witness the destructive power of wildfires sweeping through the urban landscape of Los Angeles. Words are insufficient to describe the agony of those who have lost their homes or

even love ones, prayers barely suffice. To my understanding, the current wildfires in California are driven primarily by the dry Santa Ana winds, gusting at over 100 mph. Uncontrolled fire, parched landscape and dry winds...terrible combination.

However, fire, in the hands of skilled craftsman can do wonders. Precious metals are refined by fire, as fire burns off impurities like dross, leaving behind pure silver and gold. Biblical writers have caught on to this fact, and have utilized this rich metaphor for spiritual edification. For example we see in Proverbs 17:3, *“The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.”* Or in Malachi 3:3, *“He (God) will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold...”*

We are not entirely sure what John had in mind when he talked about baptism by fire. I suspect the process would be directed by God, and is not particularly pleasant, with outcome uncertain. For those undergoing such a baptism, will they escape unscathed? Not likely. Will they be burned up, consumed like dross? Possibly. Or will they endure and remain to be like pure silver and gold? That is the hope, but no one really knows.

For this reason, psalmist offer this praise and prayer to God in Psalm 66:10-12,

*“For you, O God, have tested us;  
you have tried us as silver is tried.  
You brought us into the net;  
you laid burdens on our backs;  
you let people ride over our heads;  
we went through fire and through water;  
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.”*

You have brought us out to a spacious place! That’s the prayer, that’s the hope we cling to: when God put us through tests, through fire, that we are not left alone to endure it, and will be eventually brought out by the Spirit of God, into a spacious place.

Circling back to the metaphor of winnowing fork and threshing floor. This common agricultural illustration was well known and well used by biblical writers, in Psalm 1, in Proverbs 20, in Isaiah 41, and in Jeremiah 15. For us contemporary urban readers, it may require a bit of explanation. You see, when grain is harvested, it is taken to the threshing floor. A portion of the grain is tossed in the air with a winnowing fork. Then the wind takes

control of the process of separating the wheat from the chaff. The heavier wheat falls away, while the chaff, a mixture of husks and straw, is blown away.

In such a process, it is worth noting that the most important, active agent at work is the wind. The wind is what separates the wheat from chaff, just like the Spirit is the active agent in separating good from evil, the righteous from the unrighteous. In a sense, as envisioned by John the baptizer, this coming Messiah will be holding the winnowing fork, while the Spirit be doing the work.

So to such a vision came Jesus, who along with all the people were baptized by John. While Jesus was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him, in bodily form like a dove, in full view of the people. Then a voice came from heaven, a affirmation from God within earshot of the people, saying, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"

Can you hear the love expressed? Could you imagine what that does to Jesus the recipient? (Testimonial of baptism performed previously...)

So here we are, when we are baptized into faith, by water, Spirit and fire, we are baptized into the love of God for the Son. Remember your baptism. Just as it was the start of the earthly ministry of Jesus, our own baptism is the start of our journey with God, not as outsiders looking in, but as beloved children, well pleased and love by God. For that we give thanks.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**