

Isaiah 43: 1-7  
Acts 8: 14-17  
Luke 3: 15-22

Water, Fire and Threshing Floors  
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A father was in church with three of his young children, including his five-year-old daughter. He liked to sit close to the front so that the children could really absorb the worship experience. During this particular service, the pastor was performing the baptism of a little baby. The five-year-old Emily was quite taken by this, watching the way he was saying something and pouring water over the infant's head. With a quizzical look on her face, Emily turned to her father and asked in a loud voice: "Daddy, why is the pastor brainwashing that baby??"

Welcome to Baptism of Christ Sunday. Welcome to Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek, "epiphaneia," meaning "appearing" or "revealing." During this season between Advent and Lent, (which is quite short this year because Easter is so early) we leave the crèche and baby Jesus behind, and turn to stories of revelation. Sages and stars. Doves and voices. Water and wine. Transformation. It is a time when we open our eyes and look around, when we open the Scriptures and dig for meaning. It is a time for understanding – or explaining – to 5-year-olds why pastors do what they do, and why people let them. ☺

In some ways, we place ourselves next to those in the Bible stories and try to see events through their eyes, knowing that none of them had our confirmation classes or Sunday School to frame the experience. We know that the world has changed, but with those Bible characters, we are hoping for a glimpse of God. We stand next to those listening to Isaiah or to John the Baptist and imagine those powerful words in our ears. The Gospel of Luke tells us that those who gathered at the river Jordan to hear John's preaching were "filled with expectation." And so today I wonder: how are we filled with expectation? Expecting good things? Bad things? Brainwashing? The seas rising? The forests burning? The city streets loud with gunfire? People sorted by the winnowing fork of border checkpoints and racial intolerance into adversarial groups? What have we been led to expect? And how does that align with that for which we hope?

Well, like ours, the expectations of the people who first heard the words of Isaiah would have been based on their recent history. Two generations earlier, before most of them were born, a large number of the people of Jerusalem and Judah, perhaps the entire upper classes, had been dragged into exile in Babylon. It was a devastating memory. Their 370-year-old temple had been destroyed, the walls of the city torn down, and there was great loss of life. Now, in an amazing reversal, Cyrus the Great of Persia had conquered the Babylonians and told the Judeans that they could go home. I don't know about you, but I might have been a bit alarmed at this news. What should I expect? What if the journey were full of danger? What if there were bandits or checkpoints to avoid? What if the people who had been left behind in Jerusalem rejected us? What if the country were a wasteland or flood or fire?

In the face of all these unknowns, God comforts the people through a prophet. These words do not deny the reality of the danger: in fact, it affirms them. This God has created, formed,

redeemed, and named a people, so that **when** they had to cross rivers, they would not be overwhelmed, and **when** they encountered fire they would not be consumed. This is a very particular kind of reassurance. Not, “bad things will not happen to those loved by God,” but “Do not fear, I am with you.”

I read the story of a clergy couple who were dealing with the medical issues: the wife had back pain that eventually made surgery the best option. But, the surgery was difficult and the recovery even more so. She often felt worse in the 3 months following surgery that she had beforehand. She could hardly move. She asked her husband to read her this passage from the book of Isaiah every night while she was in bed. It was her anchor, her lifeline: this proclamation that God was with her in and through the pain.

What should we expect? Fire and water and the presence of God. A journey accompanied by the presence of God. The rebuilding of sacred space, accompanied by the presence of God. A lifetime of service and compassion, accompanied by the presence of God. Nothing easy about that. It is a strange kind of comfort, and at the same time, a wonderful promise.

It is so interesting that, in both Isaiah and Luke, we hear of the symbols of fire and water. They are opposite, but they are similar. Both are destructive, both are life-giving. Both bring us joy, both bring us fear. Both have cleansing properties. Both are used in religious rituals. To Jews and Christians, a ritual washing with water symbolizes a cleansing transformation. Even though, in the sacred stories of the Hebrews, water was often associated with danger and storms and monsters and the threat of death, it had a paradoxical flip side. Noah's flood (a story evoked by the presence of the dove in the baptism story) is both a story of the threatened annihilation of the world, and a story of the salvation of humanity and the animal kingdom through the ark. During the Exodus, the Red Sea trapped the people between the threat of drowning and the threat of a hostile army, but also became a way of safety that goes right through the waters to the promised land. The Jordan River was a barrier between the people wandering in the wilderness and the milk and honey of the promised land, but it too becomes a place where God opens a way of salvation, and a joyful journey to the new homeland. Water is not a safe passageway. For Christians, it came to symbolize a rebirth, a risky passage through womb-like waters into a new way of life.

But John the Baptist's preaching is fiery, and his words on the subject of fire may be more troubling. He predicts that the Messiah who is coming will baptize the people with spirit and fire. I am sure that this was not a comforting word to the people who had ventured down to the river expecting a quick dip. Fire sounds painful. Fire sounds like judgment. Fire can *really* hurt. Especially when John describes the Messiah with a winnowing fork in his hands, tossing the wheat (that's us, I think) into the air so that the chaff can blow off be burned off in **unquenchable** fire. I'll bet a lot of the folks at the river put their robes back on and said, “No, thanks.”

Somehow Luke sees this all as Good News, though: that is what he calls it in verse 18. So I am thinking about this unquenchable fire and wondering if it is a fire of love and forgiveness strong enough to burn away our hate and resentments. I am wondering if it looks, not like the fires of hell, but the fiery passion of God's intense and shining love for the world and everything in it. It's a little scary if the fire of God's love can jump over the firebreaks we set up to make life predictable and safe. It's a little scary if that lively flame does not judge or condemn, but purifies and liberates. It is a little scary to be loved that much.

We do not often use the image of Jesus as the farm worker, coming to clear the chaotic threshing floor of the world, where everything is dusty and messy. We are surprised to see him with a winnowing fork, throwing it all in the air so that only the precious kernels will fall through and be seen clearly as life-giving seeds, while the worthless would blow off as fire fuel. But the image feels apt at times. We are tossed up in the air, thrown into confusion, but what remains through these experiences, what is revealed, is the essential “you” or “me” the essential person, still loved by God, still full of possibility.

After the water, after the fire, after the threshing...then what? Where have all our expectations led us? We stand by the side of a river while heaven opens and God speaks again in echoes of the Isaiah promise. Jesus hears, “You are my child, you are beloved, I delight in you.” These are the words that any child needs to hear, that each of us needs to hear, in order to become a complete human being. These are the words that each of us needs to hear when a family member is dreadfully sick, or when we suffer physical pain. These are the words we need to hear when we make an unwanted journey across an unknown desert. These are the words we need to hear so that we can take on the mantle of service and compassion as Jesus did before us.

Because our baptisms join us to Jesus. We share in being named and claimed as children of God. This is not just a way of boosting our self-esteem...though it might do that. We remember our baptisms today so that we can remember who and whose we are. The world insists that we belong to ourselves, or our employer, or our family, or our children’s school or sports team, or the government of our country. The world of 550 BCE insisted that the people of Judah belonged to the Babylonian or Persian Empire. The world of 30 CE insisted that the people at the River Jordan belonged to the Roman Empire. As faithful descendants of those ancient peoples, we reject all these claims of ownership; we belong to God. It is about God’s loving presence, and through our baptism we no longer live for ourselves, we now live to, for and with the unfolding purposes of God.

We stand here at the beginning of a new year, scared of fire and thirsty for water, and we hear these stories about the expectation of a new age in Jesus. His baptism was an epiphany, a new revelation of who God is. Luke’s story turns out to reveal something of the nature of God, as a loving father, faithful son, and the fire of love between them, the Holy Spirit. It also reveals something about us, our fears and our hopes. Jesus’ baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry, his defiant march into the fires of prejudice and violence, revealing their falsehood, and unleashing his own Spirit, his fire of love in the world. When we remember his baptism today we celebrate our own immersion into his baptism. We rejoice in our own knowledge of being gathered into the fiery love of Father, Son and Spirit, so fully that we too are sent into the world with the fire of love, and with those words from heaven ringing in our ears and written on our hearts: “You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Thanks be to God for this powerful gift. Amen.