

The Baptism of Jesus

On this Sunday after Epiphany, we commemorate the Baptism of Jesus. What is the purpose of baptism? Why was Jesus baptized? What can we as individuals and as a church learn from a baptism of water and fire? Baptism is one of two sacraments that are necessary for salvation. Sacraments are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ to the church as a sure and certain means by which we receive God's favor. The other necessary sacrament is Holy Communion. Through baptism we become adopted children of God, members of the Church, and inheritors of the Kingdom of God. The outward and visible signs of baptism consist of water in the name of the Father, Son and of the Holy Spirit. The inward and spiritual grace is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.

Why was Jesus baptized if he was sinless? That is a question that the church has tried to answer since its beginnings. In response to that question, Jesus in Matthew's gospel said, *"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness."* Matthew 3:15. Baptism was necessary to fulfill God's righteousness for you and for me. Jesus went through baptism, I believe, to prove that he totally identifies with God's people and with humanity and was sent to save them once and for all times. Who then were and are God's people?

I. God's People Were A Covenant People Chosen For a Special Purpose

In Isaiah 43. The Israelites-the chosen people, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-had been taken captive into Babylonian. Later, through the Persian Empire, they were permitted to return to their homeland and they started to rebuild their temple and the city of Jerusalem. Times were hard. They were dispirited and depressed. Second Isaiah wrote chapter 43 to remind them of their election by God. He sought to lift their spirit and to assure them that God was still with them.

God had formed and created them, called them by name and claimed them as his own. Not only was God with them, he would protect them when they walked through the fires of hardship and oppression. He would not let any troubled waters overwhelm them. They were precious in God's sight and God would once again gather their sons and daughters from the far corners of the earth and lead them back to Jerusalem. They were baptized by the fire that burned away the stubble and they were tried by the waters that did not overwhelm them.

We here at St. Barnabas have not suffered captivity. We are simply in the process of a transition from priest to priest. This passage of scripture should give us hope and courage as we are in the final stages of our search process. Now and in the days and years ahead, when we pass through the waters, God will be with us. When we walk through fire, God will not let us be consumed. God will give us a good heritage and great future. God will gather our scattered flock and potential members and bring them home. But we must remember this. We must trust God. We must walk faithfully as a righteous people. And we must remember to do all of the things that God has commanded us and our fore-bearers throughout the years. *"When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flames shall not consume you."* Isaiah 43: 2b.

II. Jesus, A Savior By Water And Fire

Six hundred years after the prophet Isaiah, God's chosen people were again under the domination of a foreign power. Now they were under the fearsome power of the Roman Empire. Caesar was the emperor. Herod Antipas was the governor. Religion had enthroned itself as the guardian of the faith, but was tainted with power and corruption. Fire and water were again consuming the people of God. Then there appeared in the wilderness, a prophet who gave up his priestly role and went out into the desert to call Israel back to righteousness and faith. John the Baptist and his people were looking for an earthly Messiah to save them from sin and oppression-to help them to walk through water and fire.

Some wondered whether or not John was the Messiah, the anointed one. But John said that a mightier than him was coming to baptize people with fire and the Holy Spirit. He went on to say further, *"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."* Luke 3:16. In other words, there would be cleansing and separating elements to his Christ's coming.

The Gospel lesson for this morning also told of the baptism of Jesus where after praying, God assured Jesus of his favor by the descent of a dove and a voice of approval: *"You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."* Luke 3:21,22.

Biblically, we are encountering a dialogue between the people of Luke's community about the role of John the Baptist and the relationship between John and Jesus. Here also Jesus demonstrated a growing awareness of his role as the anointed One. He was being reassured of his mission by the outward signs of a dove and God's voice from heaven.

Liturgically this year, we have arrived at the point where the church must study and discover what all of this means. During this Epiphany season, we will review all kinds of manifestations of Jesus to the gentiles-to you and me. During Lent, we will learn of his teachings and increasing conflict with the religious and political authorities. Then during Holy Week, we shall walk with him along the Via Delorosa to Calvary. Finally, we will celebrate Christ's and our triumph over sin and death as he is raised from the dead on Easter morning.

Practically, we here at St. Barnabas are given a model for pastoral care and communal living in Isaiah 43. When our member walk through fire, we pastorally should be with them. When they go through troubled waters, we should minister to them. Let it not be said that our members are so afraid that we will not care for them in their times of need that they veer away from the church and get lost. There is, however, an aspect of respect for people's privacy. God's people must always be confidentially ready to pray and walk with those in need. The church that does that grows!

So what does Jesus' baptism mean? In my estimation, it means that Jesus went through all of the traces that humans encounter to provide a pattern for us to emulate-one that will break the pattern and power of the fire and water that have held humans in sway from times immemorial. He totally identifies with us in order that we might be caught up with him. We are called as a church and as the people of God to be Christ to one another in love.

III. What Does That Mean To You And Me?

A bunch of Samaritans in Act 8:14-17 came to learn the answer to that question. The Church had spread to Samaria. The disciples in Jerusalem heard of it and sent Peter and John to investigate. John and Peter found a people there who had been baptized but who had not received the gift of the Holy Spirit. So they laid hands upon them and the Samaritans received God's Spirit-the same spirit that John's Gospel said was with God in the beginning. The same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism. And the same spirit that can enable us, one and all, to walk through the fire and waters of our lives and through the fires and water of this congregation as we select and grow with our new priest.

I say to you this morning, "Go with God! May God show you who the anointed one is. May God wash you clean with the waters of baptism. And may God set your hearts and this congregation on fire with his Holy Spirit. Amen.