

Fire and Water

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord/ Year C

January 10, 2010

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

Have you ever walked into a room for the first time and known, somehow, beyond all normal realms of logic that you have been there before? Or, maybe you have entered into a conversation with someone only to experience the strange realization that you have spoken these same words to this same person once already. In his book, *The Future of Psychic Science*, the French philosopher Emile Boirac, termed such experiences déjà vu. Déjà vu is quite literally the experience of that which has already been seen. Modern research into déjà vu, when not taking the occasional foray into the paranormal, focuses largely on the possibility that misfires in one's short-term memory are the root cause of such experiences. Whatever the case, déjà vu, when it occurs, excites an almost mystical awareness as the sensation it creates impinges on one's orderly sense of time and reality.

This morning's reading from Saint Luke's gospel brings its own sense of déjà vu to the table or to the font as the case may be. We encountered the majority of today's reading, just four weeks ago, on the third Sunday of Advent. On that Sunday, we walked into the wilderness to find John the Baptist. His camel hair robes flapping in a stiff breeze as his cries echoed along the riverbank. People of all stripes were flocking to him, hoping to receive his baptism for the repentance of sins. Never one to mince words, John brazenly called the more well-heeled among these growing crowds "snakes in the grass." He demanded to know who told them to flee from the wrath to come, shouting for them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. John's indictment did not go unheeded. The crowds, in a most pitiful state, asked him what they should do. Rather than screaming further rebukes, John forcefully called them to social responsibility. They are to live justly with their neighbors. John's words were of such wondrous magnitude, that the crowds began to wonder whether or not John is the Messiah. He is not. "One more powerful than I is coming," he tells them and us. "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." In other words, the one whom John sees coming is going to clean house. He is going to make a clean sweep of their lives and our own. He is going to put everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he will put out with the trash to be burned."

Thus, with a whiff of fire and smoke, Luke concludes his rather unsettling introduction to Jesus' baptism. He allows his words to hang in the air; words which are far from comforting, then again, Luke's intent is not to make us comfortable. In fact, the gospel writer is perfectly happy to keep us on our toes. He is preparing us, after all, for a dramatic shift in the scenery. John the Baptist, without further ado, will exit our reading stage left, as Christ, with his "winnowing fork" and "unquenchable fire" will stroll

forward and assume the central position. While such talk of fires and forks may cause most of us to twinge, these images are hardly devoid of redemptive possibilities. When repentance and forgiveness are available to God's people, then the proclamation of God's judgment must always be seen as good news. If God were to deny us judgment, then we would be denied the certainty of a transformed and a transforming future. In a very real sense, Christ's baptism becomes that pivotal moment in which the merciful judgment of the world begins. The world is being asked to give evidence in her own trial, through the very way in which she responds to Jesus. Thus, Christ's baptism becomes a revelation not only of his own identity but of the world's intent.

Curiously, Luke's story of Jesus' baptism is short on water and long on fire. Where Matthew's gospel provides us with a grand public miracle complete with bright lights, a flowing river and loud voices proclaiming Christ's divinity, Luke is more matter-of-fact. He treats Jesus' baptism as almost incidental. Only after John baptizes him and Jesus enters into an attitude of prayer, are we able to witness the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend upon him. While the fluttering of a dove certainly can't compete with the tongues of flame which will be present at Pentecost, the Spirit's arrival, not to mention the voice fingering Jesus as the chosen one of God, serves to unveil our Lord as something more than a prophet or a mere voice crying in the wilderness. He is the very flame, the light in the darkness, around which the fullness of our existence must now become oriented. In turning toward him, we will be kept out of the winnowing fires of a wasteful existence. And yet, by that very same turning, we will be plunged into the baptismal fire of the Spirit which is none too safe. Just ask John the Baptist. He will spend his remaining time in Luke's gospel sitting in prison awaiting the executioner's axe.

Despite all of this, Christ's baptism cannot fail to stir within us a certain ambivalence. "Who is this Jesus who has been baptized and what does his baptism mean for us?" we wonder. Is He really the God of love who knit together all of creation? What does being chosen by this God do for us? Sure, we may be called his beloved children. God may even be well pleased with us, but ultimately what sort of affirmation is this? After all, God says the same thing about Jesus and he ends up on a cross. Is that what is ahead for us?

T. S. Elliot, in his poem entitled *Little Gidding*, captures something of both the power and pain inherent in our baptism. "[See] the dove descending breaks the air" he writes, "with flame of incandescent terror." In a few simple words, the poet seems to grasp the intensity of what it means to be baptized both with water and with the fire of the Holy Spirit. There is something terrorizing and tormenting about this fire. However, as it burns against our consciences and prods us out of ourselves, we will quickly discover that our tormentor is the very love which sustains the universe.

Therefore, as Jesus was baptized by John, so must we be baptized- not just in waters of repentance and forgiveness, but by the fiery presence of the Holy Spirit which calls us to give ourselves for the good of others. This morning, our gospel speaks of two baptisms. The first is that moment of revelation which this feast celebrates: the baptism

which Jesus received at the hands of John. The second is the baptism that we have received from the hands of Jesus, the baptism of water and spirit which incorporated us into God's church. Jesus' baptism revealed him as the "Beloved Son." Our own baptisms reveal us to be a people who are saved, renewed, justified and ultimately heirs of eternal life. This feast, then, not only celebrates the epiphany or "showing forth" of who Jesus is, but also the epiphany or "showing forth" of who we are. We are a people called to have the divine presence within us. We are to live lives aflame with a holy fire. We are to show the world a fresh ardor, an intensity, an energy, a commitment toward the goals and purpose of God. Our baptism, therefore, is a dynamic and energetic embracing of our own graced identity as God's people. When we take our baptism seriously, we cannot help but be open to God's continuing grace as He trains us to be faithful to who He has made us to be. Through his sacrificial death on the cross, God has given us a share in his divinity. The only response God requires of us, this morning, is our willingness to die to self in faithfulness to our baptismal vows. By living into our baptisms, our lives will manifest, not only the passion and death of our Savior but will point toward God's ultimate gracious act toward us which is nothing short of the very coming of his kingdom, a promise which is even now being fulfilled within our hearing.