

**SERMON FOR THE FESTIVAL OF THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD  
JANUARY 13, 2013  
BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 3: 15-17, 21-22**

A mother was at home with her two young daughters one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine until she noticed something strange. The house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing. Quietly walking into each of the girls' rooms and not finding them there, she began to get worried. Then she heard it: the sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet. Following the sound, she soon realized where it was coming from. It was coming from her bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Poking her head into the room, she saw both of her daughters standing over the commode. One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other one had her finger on the handle. More whispers, and more flushing. And then as she strained to listen to what they were saying this is what she heard: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go." Flush.

Those are difficult moments for us as parents aren't they. On the one hand you don't want to interrupt your child when they're imitating something they've seen in church. And yet, when there's something missing, you want to intervene in the best way possible. Maybe that's the time to give thanks for Confirmation and just look forward to the day when they'll be the pastor's problem to sort out.

Or maybe you want to take a more direct approach, like John the Baptist in our gospel lesson today. As John's ministry gathered momentum, as it began attracting more and more attention, as it began making a bigger and bigger splash (pardon the pun) the people, Luke tells us, were filled with expectation and began questioning in their hearts, and probably out loud too, whether John might be the one, the Messiah.

But with no hesitation or equivocation John answers them loud and clear. "No I am not," he says in a manner of speaking. "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming...he will baptize you with the HS and fire. 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."

And I don't know. Call me chicken. But personally, sometimes when I read these words, I have a hard time understanding how baptism with fire is something we're supposed to look forward to more than just baptism with water. And I suspect that the case with most of us here.

This is the kind of language that just makes us nervous doesn't it? After all baptism with water the way we do it is such a dignified ritual isn't it. It's so beautiful and orderly and clean. It's such a wonderful opportunity to get the whole family together. Such a great tradition through which to stay connected with the generations before ours. Baptism as we know it is such a nice sacrament that it makes us nervous to hear all this talk of fire and burning of chaff.

Or maybe it makes us nervous for another reason. Maybe in our more honest moments it makes us wonder if there isn't something missing from our understanding or experience of baptism. Either way, the truth is we need these words of John today. Because they remind us that there is a power in our baptism that too often gets covered up by all the tradition and sentimentality surrounding this sacrament.

Maybe the experience that most convinced me of this is a man I knew in the congregation I served in Saskatoon. He had been through a traumatic divorce and was finding it increasingly difficult to function personally and in his job. But eventually he found his way into the congregation through a neighbor that was a member. And we started to talk. First about his problems, then about faith.

Eventually he expressed an interest in exploring baptism and so we started talking about that. Except that in all my conversation with him I very deliberately avoided those passages of scripture, like our gospel, lesson, and psalm that spoke of baptism with images of destruction and purging and even death and resurrection. Frankly I thought that kind of language would just traumatize him more than he already was. But to my utter astonishment it was exactly that imagery that ended up connecting with him most powerfully.

You see this was a guy who for the few years previous to my meeting him had gone around with only one voice in his head. It was a voice telling him that he was a failure as a parent and as a husband. It was a voice telling him that he didn't deserve the sympathy or the respect of his kids or his co-workers until he cleaned

up his act and got it together. It was a voice telling him that his worth as a human being lay in his ability to produce at his job, something he was finding it harder and harder to do. And it was a voice that constantly reminded him that there was never anything he could do to make things right.

But in baptism he saw a hope. "If God can get rid of that voice of judgement in my life," he once told me, "and replace it with a new voice telling me I'm loved unconditionally, that I'm worthwhile, that I'm valuable no matter what, then I want to be baptized." And that year at the Easter Vigil he was. As I poured the water over his head I watched as the Holy Spirit and God's fire fell down on him, consuming that voice of judgment in the flames of God's mercy and grace. And then I watched as he straightened up, as tall and as full of goodness and confidence as a stalk of sun-ripened prairie wheat.

And I have never quite looked at baptism the same way again after that. Yes baptism is a beautiful ritual and a wonderful tradition. But it is also so much more powerful than that. It's the act of God tearing open the heavens and coming down to us, invading our lives, and burning with unquenchable fire that voice inside all of us that only wants to tell us lies. That voice that wants to tell us we're not good enough, we're not loveable, we have to do more before God will approve of us, that we're not gifted, that we're not called. Or that we're too good, that we're better than everyone else, that we're more deserving than others, that we're the only one we can depend on, that God can't be trusted. Baptism is the HS putting to a fiery death the sinner and all its lies.

And then its God doing to us on a very personal level what he did on a cosmic level at the beginning of time. Its God calling life into being out of nothing, light out of darkness, order out of chaos. Its God raising up out of the waters of our baptism a new person with a new heart centered on God, sure of our status as a beloved child of God, and committed to the disciple-life of following our Lord.

And it's exactly for that reason that we take the time on this Sunday every year to remember and affirm our own baptisms. As Martin Luther was famous for saying the sinner might have been drowned in our baptism, but he's still a pretty good swimmer. And so as we speak those words later together we will be renouncing the voice of the liar inside of us and inviting the HS to incinerate it one more time.

And we will be reaffirming our commitment to the new, joy-filled life of fruit-bearing that God created us to live. So that as we leave this place to go out to face the world with its messages of judgement and conditional approval or its temptations to self-glorification or ego-satisfaction, we go with only the voice of our creator in our head. The voice of our creator who today reminds us:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you,  
do not fear, for I am with you.*

*You are my beloved child.*

*With you I am well pleased.*

AMEN.