

Following Jesus through Flood and Fire

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Farmville Baptist Church

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I remember it like it was yesterday: the day of my baptism. Or at least I remember the feelings, even if I'm not crystal clear on all the details. I was young – around 8 – and very excited. I was also a little bit nervous. I remember that it was a big deal in my family; my parents had planned a reception after church, because I had a lot of out-of-town family in for the event, and I was dressed in my Sunday best. My best friend's father was my pastor, and along with two other kids around my age, I waited for him to call me down into the baptistry. My friends going through baptism with me were shorter than I am, and needed to stand on a cinder block to see over the front of the baptismal pool, but I was

like my son is: tall for my age. I didn't need the cinder block! I don't really remember the words that my pastor asked, or my response, but I clearly remember going backwards under water and my foot rising off the floor...and nudging that cinder block across the floor of the tub! I don't know if anyone could hear it, but it definitely bounced. And M&Ms – I remember that we had pastel-colored M&Ms at the reception.

Do you remember your baptism? If you are a follower of Jesus, I'd imagine you had an experience like mine at some point in your life – though, if you are from a tradition that baptizes babies because of a slightly different understanding of what baptism is all about, you may not remember it. But if you do, take a moment and call that memory to mind. What did you think that day? What did you feel? What did it

mean, on that day and on every other day since then? And why did you do it – why were you baptized?

The range of answers you may bring to mind is, in one sense, unique to you and your own experience. And yet baptism has been a constant of the Christian faith from the very beginning. Paul and Peter speak about baptism in their letters. The book of Acts is filled with references to the baptism of new believers, most vividly in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Even Jesus' own ministry included baptizing others, though it was not a major theme; John 3:22 tells us that early in his ministry, Jesus and his disciples baptized some of those who lived in the Judean countryside, near where John was baptizing, though the Gospel tells us in the next chapter that it was Jesus' disciples who were baptizing others, and not Jesus himself.¹ Baptism became

¹ John 4:1-2

the point of entry, the initiation ritual into the community of faith that Jesus began, and in some form or another it remains so today.

But at the more bedrock level, why do we baptize and get baptized? The simple answer is this: we do it because Jesus did. And, as people who want to follow Jesus, to be his disciples, we try to do the things he did to the best of our God-given and God-assisted ability. So when we decide to accept Jesus' invitation to follow him, our churches teach us that into the water we go.

But why? Why do we do what Jesus did – and why, really, did he do what he did?

That second question may be a good place for us to start. Each of the Gospel writers records some aspect or retelling of Jesus' baptismal story, but like any good storyteller, they tell it in their own way. Mark, the one we think was written

down first, is short and to the point: “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”² Matthew’s version highlights the conversation between John and Jesus, where John expressed his feelings of unworthiness – saying he needed to be baptized by Jesus, and not the other way around – but Jesus claiming there was a symbolic need for him to be baptized by John. The Gospel of John doesn’t directly describe the baptism of Jesus at all, but showcases John’s own awareness of who Jesus was as God’s Chosen One, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Luke’s version of the event, the passage we’ve read today, has a slightly different focus from any of the others. In fact, the baptism can almost seem like a “blink and you miss it” moment. Luke tells us, “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.”³ The element of Jesus’

² Mark 1:9

³ Luke 3:21

baptism Luke was lifting up was the way Jesus fulfilled the promise of the prophets like Isaiah, who we heard earlier: I will be with you. That, after all, was the meaning of the name Isaiah gave his own child, and that Matthew connects with Jesus – Immanuel, God with us. And it is the deeper meaning behind the passage from Isaiah we read a few minutes ago, where God told his people living in exile and difficulty, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”⁴ God has always walked closely with his people, whatever they face and wherever they are. And as Jesus steps onto the stage, we’re told, “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized, too.”

⁴ Isaiah 43:1b-2a

I think there is something fundamentally powerful about what Luke is telling us here. Think about the baptism that John was offering to the people in that day – it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We looked at that just a few weeks ago, but it's worth revisiting that here for a moment. Repentance is the turning away from something towards something else. And in this case the repentance is for the forgiveness of sins. Sins are the things we do that separate us from God and from one another, the words and actions and mindsets that tear down the bridges between us and build up walls. Sins can be incredibly hurtful actions, betrayals and woundings and rejections and more. Sins can make life like hell itself, a living hell, if we are the people who are sinned against.

John was preaching that there were things the people were doing – the same sorts of things we do – that were

hurting others and hurting God. His baptism was a public admission of that and a pledge to do better – to turn away from those sorts of actions and turn towards God. Lots of people heard John’s invitation and took the brave and vulnerable step of getting into the water. It was their public admission that they had things not quite right in their lives, and they wanted to turn from those things that divided them and separated them from one another and God and turn back towards the God who made and loved them.

Then think about Jesus. Did he need any of that for himself? No. The Scriptures teach us that he was without sin, the very Son of God. Only on the cross itself do we get a sense that something came between him and his Father. And yet, Luke tells us, “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.” In the midst of this chaotic, messy, and often painful life, Jesus chose to be with

those who were going through the waters. As he stepped in among them, he was embodying what Isaiah had recorded God saying: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.”⁵ In the midst of their brokenness, their guilt, their pain, their numbness, and their desperate hope of some path back to God and others, Jesus came to be with them. In the midst of our brokenness, our guilt, our pain, our numbness, and our desperate hope of some path back to God and others, Jesus came to be with us. Jesus was baptized in the waters, and following his example to be with him and with all who seek God, we join him there.

But what is incredibly interesting about Luke’s version of the baptism of Jesus is that John speaks of another baptism. Indeed, Matthew does as well – both Gospels remember how

⁵ Isaiah 43:2a-b

John said that when the Messiah comes, when Jesus arrives, he will baptize his followers not with water, but with fire, a symbol in the New Testament for the Holy Spirit. And in Acts 1, as Jesus is preparing to ascend to heaven and his followers prepare to carry on his work, he tells them, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”⁶ That baptism came in a roar of flame on Pentecost, and the baptism, or gift, of the Spirit continues to be the true power of the church. But grasping what that means for us – as individuals and as a congregation – can be difficult.

Fortunately, John gives us a glimpse. In Luke 3, our passage today, he tells the people clamoring for God’s power

⁶ Acts 1:4-5

to arrive, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”⁷ Sounds a little menacing to me – does it to you? I’m reminded of old-school preachers who would, as I heard once, “dangle you over hell like a hot dog on a stick” to get you to do whatever they thought God wanted you to do. John the Baptist has a reputation as a firebrand, after all, and if a little brimstone gets thrown into the mix, we’re not really surprised.

But I don’t think that’s what John’s talking about here. I don’t think this is a “scare them straight” sort of message. No, what I think he is describing is the work the Spirit does within us – within our souls, within our minds, within our fellowship of faith when we choose to follow Jesus

⁷ Luke 3:16b-17

wholeheartedly. Like a flame that burns away the dross in a precious metal, the flame of the Spirit burns away the dross of our lives – the parts of ourselves that are not aligned with God, the prejudices and predilections that throw up those walls between us and others and burn our bridges with the kingdom of God. As John says, the chaff is burned up – and the good is kept, safe and secure and used for the glory of our Lord.

Now, that may sound uncomfortable to us still, even if it isn't quite as scary as the "hot dog over hell" picture we may have had to start with. But Luke reminds us that the same Jesus who was with us in the flood – in the waters of baptism – is with us in the fire – the flame of the Spirit's baptism. This is reinforced by the second part of the passage from Isaiah: "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord

your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” A couple verses later he says, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”⁸

In the midst of the firestorm of the Spirit, Jesus is with us. And while the purifying, the washing with water and flame may not be comfortable, it will be fulfilling; and while it may not be easy, it will be empowering. Indeed, if what happened to the apostles at Pentecost, and what has happened to generation after generation of Christians is also what happens to us, when the fire of the Spirit washes over us, it doesn't leave. It inhabits us, fills us with a fiery passion and joy of heaven that can kindle the hearts of those we meet and carry us through whatever trial we face. We burn brightly, not for ourselves, but for God.

Blaise Pascal was one of the most brilliant men who ever lived. A 17th-century polymath whose contributions in

⁸ Isaiah 43:2c-3a, 5a

mathematics, science, philosophy, and theology still make an impact today, Pascal's flame burned bright all on its own. He wrote his first mathematical treatise at age 16, and contributed to the invention of the first calculator. He was a Catholic by family tradition, but approached faith from a detached and philosophical standpoint...until one night in 1654. Pascal had a spiritual experience that night, one that revitalized his faith and led him to make some of the most consequential reflections on God of his era. Yet the experience he had was unknown until after his death, when a servant going through his clothes after his passing happened to find this note sewn into the lining of his jacket:

FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Your GOD will be my God. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except

GOD. He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel. Grandeur of the human soul. Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. I have departed from him: They have forsaken me, the fount of living water. My God, will you leave me? Let me not be separated from him forever. This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified. Let me never be separated from him. He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel: Renunciation, total and sweet. Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director. Eternally in joy for a day's exercise on the earth. May I not forget your words. Amen.⁹

In this personal reflection, one important enough that he carried it with him every day but personal enough he shared it with no one else, Pascal records his baptism by the Spirit of God. Note the words that he uses to describe the experience

⁹ <https://aleteia.org/2016/06/18/the-mystical-vision-of-blaise-pascal/>

that changed his life: joy; peace; forgetfulness of the world; commitment to the ways of God; Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified. Let me never be separated from him; may I never forget your words. And how does this Memorial, as it has come to be known, begin? “FIRE.”

May you experience the sweeping flame of the Spirit of God. May you find peace and forgiveness in the experience of your own baptism. And may you know beyond doubt the joy of the Savior, Jesus, who walks with you, through flood and through fire, whatever life brings, and wherever he leads.