

Epiphany 1C 2019 Sermon

Isaiah 43:1-2

*Thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. 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 granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Have you ever had one of those weeks when there seems to be a recurring theme popping up in your daily life in unexpected ways? Perhaps a topic continually comes up in conversations you have with different people throughout the week, and again that topic pops up in what you are reading, and again in what you are watching on TV? This past week was one of those weeks for me. And the theme which kept popping up in my conversations, my studies, what I read, and what I listened to, centered around this question: "How does one approach the Bible?"

It was the theme of Richard Rohr's daily email meditations all week. (If you do not already subscribe to them, I heartily recommend them – they are free!)¹ Then, throughout this past week, my conversations with various people in our Men 4 Him study group, with people who came by the office, and with fellow pastors at our Ministerial Alliance meeting reminded me of the different approaches various Christians take toward the Bible. I have also been listening to a lecture series from *The Great Courses* about the 200-year period between 1450 and 1650 A.D. when the understanding of the Christian Faith – and particularly of the Bible – underwent significant changes.² And finally, as I was preparing for this sermon, I read a commentary on today's Gospel passage that challenged me to look at this story of John the Baptist in a very different light than I ever had before.

John the Baptist says to the crowds who have come out to be baptized by him: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. 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 granary; but the chaff he will

burn with unquenchable fire.” One commentator notes: “Today we think of ‘separating the wheat from the chaff’ as sorting out the good people from the bad. This understanding has always been unsettling to me. It’s the stuff of nightmares: a big, burly farmer-god throwing people into the air with a pitchfork, then burning alive the ones that come back down into the wrong pile.”³ I daresay that this interpretation is probably the most common understanding for the casual reader of this passage, as well as for some serious Christians of a more literalist bent. Those of us (like me) who believe that the True God revealed in Jesus Christ would *never* do such a thing as to consign people to “unquenchable fire” have often interpreted the “chaff” in this passage to symbolize not *people*, but rather our ego “junk,” our sinful *stuff* that needs to go. The fire Jesus will bring will be a purifying, not a destructive, fire. In a verse from the familiar hymn “How Firm a Foundation,” God says:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
*thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*⁴

That is an image which comes straight from our Isaiah reading that we heard earlier. And I think that that interpretation of today’s Gospel is a *valid* interpretation – by which I mean that it is faithful to the Biblical text. The chaff is not “bad people,” but rather the “dross” of our lives, our False Selves, our ego selves, our sinful propensities which **need** to be burned away as in a crucible in order for our True Selves, our “gold,” to emerge. That’s the *only* interpretation of this passage that had made any sense to me up until this past week, when I read a reflection on this passage by Fr. John Shea. Fr. Shea writes:

“[John the Baptist] correctly understands that he is not the Messiah but the forerunner of one mightier than himself. He must learn from that one, for he is not fit to loosen his sandal strap. This attitude of learning from the One Who Is to Come will be important, for **what John envisions will not be what will come about.**” What John envisions will *not* be what will come about.

“John foresees a baptism in ‘the Holy Spirit and fire,’” continues Dr. Shea. “But **he mistakenly assumes this Holy Spirit and fire means judgment and destruction.** The Holy Spirit becomes a rough wind that separates the wheat and the chaff when the winnowing fan lifts it into the air, and fire awaits the combustible chaff. Wind (Holy Spirit) and fire work together to separate the good [people] from the bad and to reward the good and punish the bad.

“However, when Jesus comes, he will be the source of the Holy Spirit and fire in a quite *different* way. He will connect people to God so that the Holy Spirit can work through them to such a degree that people will see their ‘good works and give glory to [their] Father in heaven’ (Matt 5:16). This Holy Spirit will inspire and direct their lives, providing the *commitment* to carry out John’s agenda of reform. The Holy Spirit is the spiritual energy to share with others and not oppress them. **This** is the fire that both purifies every moral effort and provides the passion to persevere. It is a fire that burns without burning out, the fire of the bush that energized Moses in his relentless efforts to free the people from slavery (Exod 3:2).”⁵

Moses' burning bush was not destroyed by the fire; instead, that burning bush became a source, not of destruction, but of inspiration and passion and energy to empower and sustain Moses for the mission on which God was sending him.

My friends, I would venture to guess that a large *majority* of Christians down through the centuries have believed that John the Baptist's words in this Gospel passage are coming directly from God. That's what *I* had always believed. But what if that is **not** the case? What if John's understanding of a **separating** Spirit and a **destructive** fire is *wrong*? What if the fire that Jesus will bring is like the **non-destructive** fire of Moses' burning bush? You may remember that later in Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist, having been imprisoned by Herod, sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"⁶ Clearly, John doesn't quite get it! He isn't sure whether Jesus is the One whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. John *thinks* that the Messiah is going to come with a winnowing fork in his hand and burn up all the bad people, but that is *not* what **Jesus** does; so John questions whether Jesus really **is** the Messiah. For Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors and forgives adulterers – not the kind of winnowing fork Messiah John had envisioned! Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "...among those born of women no one is greater than John [the Baptist]; yet the *least* in the kingdom of God is greater than [John]."⁷ The *least* in the kingdom of God is greater than John. John's mindset is **not** a kingdom-of-God mindset; it is a mindset of judgment and punishment – which is the mindset of this world.

Now, please don't get me wrong. I am *not* saying that you and I can interpret the Bible in any way we please. Not every interpretation is faithful to the Biblical text. What I *am* saying is that, in interpreting **today's** Gospel in a manner which sees that John the Baptist does not **get** the kind of Messiah he expects, we are being *totally* faithful to the text, especially in light of John's later questioning whether Jesus really *is* the Messiah and Jesus' words that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist.

So, if John's message of separation, judgment, and punishment gets it *wrong*, what **is** the message of today's Gospel story for us? I would suggest that, rather than focusing on *John's fiery* words, we focus instead on the words which come to Jesus from heaven: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" It is because of **these** words that we read this passage on this first Sunday after the Epiphany. **These** words are the epiphany which reveals the nature of Jesus' relationship with God the Father: a relationship characterized by love and favor. And I firmly believe that these words from heaven are spoken to **us**, also, for they are the very meaning of our **own** baptism. And so, today as you renew your baptismal vows and are sprinkled with water, hear that same voice from heaven speaking directly to you: "You are my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

AMEN

¹ Follow this link to read the 2019 email meditations. <https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/2019/>
To sign up, click on "Email Sign Up" at the top of that web page.

² "Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650" <https://www.amazon.com/Reformations-Early-Modern-World-1450-1650/dp/0300111924>

³ "About that Baptism by Fire..." Joanna Harader, *The Christian Century*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-13-baptism-c-luke-315-17-21-22-acts-814->

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⁴ *Hymnal 1982* #636, #637

⁵ John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 12

⁶ Luke 7:19

⁷ Luke 7:28