

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Road

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

The First Sunday after Epiphany (C)

January 13, 2019

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Why we are baptized”

DRAFT

The Gospel: Luke 3:17-19, 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.”

Refine us, Lord, with your Holy Spirit that we may become more alive in you.

Amen.

I think we Christians most of the time think John the Baptist was just a little out of it when he goes so extreme: the Messiah “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” And we just shake our heads and think his further comment will never sell in our time and place: “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.”

We are not so happy with the ‘hot place’ and duck any suggestion that is either hot, or, even there. John the Baptist is just too, well, fiery, for us moderns. Love is good. A loving God is great. But, fire, well, let’s not dwell on that.

I am not so sure the two ‘fires’ in Verses 18 and 19 are quite the same. But the way we read these two sentences together makes us quite queasy.

My thought is that God is indeed an unquenchable purifying fire. However, not all fire burns, as in, ‘hot’. I heard a teacher recently expound on how hot our bodies were, 98.6 degrees, so close to boiling,

confusing Fahrenheit with Celsius. It was surely a slip of the tongue, but maybe we can see the irony in view of today's gospel. We are about to burn up ourselves, was the teacher's point, and John the Baptist would probably have given a 'thumbs up' to that idea. We say of course we find ourselves 'in hot water' from time to time, and our common language sort of acknowledges that heat, even extreme heat, becomes an appropriate analogy to parts of human life. But what is our prophet John the Baptist really saying, and, does he realize it?

I cannot say for sure, but oftentimes God speaks through us in ways we can scarcely

understand, or at least sometimes that is the case. And when we envision these earthly bodies trying to contain something God wants out, we may see some heat. God will not be deprived by our silence, is the thought I have. God will speak; we may not listen, but God surely will speak. And, sometimes God will speak using our lips and/or our actions.

Unfortunately for John the Baptist, his word from the Lord got his head cut off. He crossed the line when he criticized Herod's wife Herodias for divorcing the other Herod, our Herod's brother, and marrying this

Herod. Angry emperor's or king's wives will not easily be put down.

But can we possibly see some differences between Christ's baptismal Spirit, and the Spirit that will finally judge the living and the dead? Surely, there is only one Spirit, but does God's Holy Spirit work in different ways for different reasons?

When we baptize a baby or when we baptize anyone, we will usually 'seal them with the Holy Spirit and mark them as God's own forever,' and we use the Bishop's blessed Oil of Baptism, we call it, "Oil of Chrism", to sign a cross on the new baptizan's head. The baptizan, the one

baptized, is not instantaneously ‘burned up’, but if we give full reign to the new sign on a person’s head, they are probably to understand that what they have done is permanent, and if they allow it, life-changing. Now, that possibly does not happen all or most of the time; we slide back from time to time; yet we have that little ‘moral compass’ always trying to set us on the ‘straight and narrow’ again. We of course resist, to our own detriment.

But look on the positive side; we baptized Christians, we Christians, are all carriers of the most high God, bearers of the Holy Spirit. Too bad we generally hide this

in our day to day lives; but we recognize many are simply lost without a cause, without certainty, without the knowledge of the love of God; see I said it: “God loves us; God really loves us.” There is no way God would want to lose even a hair of our heads. We are holy creatures in earthly bound bodies. But ultimately, we are Holy People. We do not have to be Saints, with the capital letter, to be Holy; we just are, perhaps a bit below our surface, all saints. The church rarely reminds us of this except on All Saints Sunday; but we Christians are indeed ‘all saints’. How we show forth our saint-

hood is what we need to ponder, and of course act upon.

I see a lot of homeless people on the New York streets; some are indeed Christians, and I am deeply disturbed in my soul about how they got where they are, or, really, are not. They have no shelter, no safe shelter; they often have little food, if any; and some discretionary change is about everything they own.

You perhaps have heard my story about standing behind a beggar at the Elizabeth Post Office in New Jersey; one cool morning nearing winter, he pulled out a big bag of coins and spread them all across the

clerk's counter; and, amazing to me, the postal clerk calmly let us standing in his line know that his line was now closed; and we moved to another line as he carefully counted out the man's change: it totaled something around four hundred dollars, would you believe, in quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies. And the man said, something like, 'yes, it's time to go south', and he would buy a bus ticket with the cash bills that the Post Office cashier gave him in exchange for all those coins; apparently during the winter months in the south, he would collect and save another four hundred dollars to move back north for the summer.

I love animals; I adore animals; however, since I had to put down my pet German Shepherd when I was about sixteen, I could not face that possibility again, it was so heart wrenching; but I still love pets.

However, when I am approached on the Manhattan streets to give to care for animals, I can scarcely stop myself from saying, and I admit I have said, 'but there's so many homeless people'.

I am probably impossibly affected by the Holy Spirit when I allow God's Spirit to work within me. That seems a malady I can scarcely overcome; the Spirit burns within

me, and I take on a bit of John the Baptist, Lord forgive me.

But, let's feed the people, first; let's see those in dire need around us, first.

Pet food budgets can be very high; what can or could we do for a person's health and well being with that amount of money? I am not 'anti-pet', but maybe our sensitivities need to be tampered with just a wee bit.

Do we see our neighbor in need; do we pass her or him by?

Let John's fire well up within us, and refine us, pushing away the unnecessary to get to the gold. The gold may be in our own pocket, but it is there because we have been

chosen by God to make a real difference in
someone else's life.

Amen.

Description:

John the Baptist tells it like he thought it was; God is a refining fire. But we also know God is a loving God. Yet the loving God sometimes uses a bit of internal heat to correct us, bend us, just a little from our staunch positions.

Tags:

Pets, Holy, Spirit, hot, fire, baptism, homeless, gold, priorities, refine, John, Baptist, Herod, Post Office

St. Luke's Episcopal Church
85 Greenway South
Forest Hills, Queens, New York 11375
The First Sunday after the Epiphany:
The Baptism of Our Lord (C)
January 10, 2016

DRAFT

“God shows us who we are”

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus
Christ according to

Luke 3:17-19, 21-22

Baptize us, Lord, with your Holy
Spirit that we may become alive in you.
Amen.

The writers of the four gospels tell this story about the baptism of Jesus in somewhat different ways. They each struggled with the fact that Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist, clearly a lesser person by his own admission than Jesus. In fact, only Mark's gospel names John as the baptizer, and in this last gospel to be written,

the Gospel we read today according to Luke, written probably a hundred years after the events of Jesus life, death, and resurrection, this gospel of Luke recalls the baptismal story in such a way that John could not have even been there at the baptism, since in the three verses which our gospel reading today omits, Verses 18 through 20 of Luke 4, John the Baptist has already been put in prison by Herod before the baptism is recounted by Luke. Why this distancing from what actually happened? Each successive gospel keeps John's name and presence further and further away from this event as though John the Baptist was more than just a bit of an

embarrassment to these sacred writers.

Historians, however, point out that when an embarrassing but significant event happens and is recorded such as the baptism of Jesus, these subsequent reports simply strongly confirm the actual historicity of the event because later authors could simply have omitted an embarrassing event. Even in their great embarrassment over John the Baptist, the four gospel writers found themselves bound to have to record this profound event, the Baptism of Our Lord. In other words all the gospel writers by including this miraculous baptismal event have confirmed to us that John the Baptist

did baptize Jesus; that the lesser did baptize the greater. So of all the stories in the whole Bible, this one story is probably the best attested one of all. God in God's wisdom has used these four gospel writers to say something which was of profoundly great significance to the future of our world.

Baptism becomes a pinnacle event in the life of God's Son, Jesus.

What happens here in this sacred baptismal story?--several things: One, Jesus shows that he will not put himself above any human being. Two, Jesus came to save us, not to demean us, not to lessen us, but to show us the way into the mystery of how

God works in our world. And three, God used a desert-living, unkempt prophet, in a very out of the way place, to make the most grand announcement about who was the Messiah, the most significant thing that had ever happened since our very planet was created some 4.5 billion years ago. God had in physical form left our planet alone for billions of years except for a handful of Old Testament prophets and kings that kept trying to show us the way back to God. Of course there were the unquestionable or maybe questionable physical manifestations of God in previous millennia. Recall the Flood that wiped out all humankind except

Noah and his tiny family. And there were the earthquakes and volcanos at Sodom and Gomorrah. Too, the Red Sea opened up at just the correct time after all the other plagues could not reprogram the pagan Egyptians. But by and large only the surprising victories of the understaffed army of Israel were able to show God's power in any directly observable way. Yet God always seemed to be there with humanity, guiding, encouraging, and occasionally punishing humans. But rarely did God appear in any physical form, except for that burning bush and the personhood of God

that Elijah saw only the back of when God hid Elijah in the crack of a rock.

But some 4.5 billion years after our planet's beginning, God decided at this very moment in time and at this particular spot of the unimpressive Jordan River, and using this unenviable unkempt person, John the Baptist, that God would at this very point in time of all time announce that God had come to our planet of all the planets in the universe to show us God's way directly.

I said to my congregation on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, that the tiny baby that we so adore at Christmas was actually the Creator of the heaven and the earth some

13.8 billion years ago. This baby was truly the 14 billion year old man, who decided to interdict human affairs in our time and on our planet.

God's coming into our world as a baby was nothing less than spectacular with angels and archangels and a moving bright shining star; but today's event is different, and it is even more significant in that God's very voice is heard by everyone at Jesus' baptismal site. And all the four gospel writers agree in this scene that the Spirit descended upon Jesus and clearly designated Jesus as God's Son.

So why didn't everyone drop to their knees and begin to worship Jesus at this moment and site? I suppose humans are just that way. Even if God Godself speaks, some of us are skeptical, aloof, defiant, or even unconcerned. But the message of God was that here and now, we had better pay attention to Jesus. God didn't say that about Abraham, or Jacob, or Moses, or King David, or any of the prophets. God however did use them to speak to us and to the people of the time. But now God speaks unspeakable praise about Jesus, God's Son.

The theory that I ascribe to is that God created the heavens and the earth from what

we call matter and energy, some of which we call light and some of which we now call “dark”. There is in physicist’s terms now, dark matter and dark energy, and light energy and matter that can be converted to light. And astronomers tell us that for about two hundred million years, an observer in our universe could not tell the one from the other, light from darkness, everything appeared as darkness for two hundred million years after the Big Bang. But exploration of the Big Bang has shown that at that at the two million year mark in the history of our universe that light outdistanced dark. And we know our most

significant telescopes can now dimly see back 13.6 billion years, but not back to the actual beginning of all things at 13.8 billion years ago. And these telescopes are so sophisticated now that they can see about 12 billion years back in time so clearly that other stars with planets can be examined spectroscopically for oxygen which is the universal marker of life. Without oxygen there can be no plants. Without plants there can be no animals. And only about a hundred or so galaxies remain to be examined for planets with oxygen. So far, no planet within about 12 billion light years of our galaxy contains oxygen in a

breathable atmosphere, regardless of what one might read in science fiction books.

Even in the Star Wars movies all the animal and humanoid lifeforms breathe oxygen, so even George Lucas and Stephen Spielberg have been educated about oxygen being the essence of life.

But the essence of God works in light, with light, and through light. And God is opposed to dark, dark matter, dark energy, although astrophysicists tell us that nearly two-thirds of our universe is composed of dark matter and dark energy. What we once thought of as ‘vacuum’ is actually dark matter or dark energy. All creation is either

light or dark energy and matter. But at this point in physics and astrophysics we understand light far more than we understand dark energy and dark matter. So far essentially all of physics is concerned with light, not with dark energy and dark matter which is so poorly understood. We do know now however, that the dark matter and dark energy at the center of every galaxy in the universe hold each galaxy together. At the core of every galaxy is what is called a “Black Hole”, just another way of saying dark matter and dark energy. And light- and light-based matter are constantly being pulled into this Black Hole of each galaxy.

But I speculate that some individuals themselves are somehow composed of the some of the essence of dark matter and dark energy. And they are constantly trying to pull us people of the light 'down' to their level. But only by ascribing to the power of God who created all things are we of the realm of light able to overcome this darkness which pervades so much of our universe. Only by observing the working of people of the dark do we know what tricks they can perpetrate on us people of the light, and they will always be doing that; it the essence of their character. But we are not God, and we cannot know for certain

anyone's composition, spiritually or physically. That is known only to God. So, we are continually locked in a battle between those people who even from before our births God designated as people of the light, and those who from before their births were not ever going to become people of the light. But the distinction between the two is known only by God and God's Son, Jesus Christ, not by us humans. We humans can only speculate; we can never know the essence of any other human being like God knows.

Baptism becomes somewhat of a litmus test for telling the difference between

people, which is why we oftentimes want to baptize our babies as quickly as we can, so they will be designated as people of the light who follow the only true Messiah who will save us for all eternity. Yet some will point to imposters who have gotten baptized and to some ‘good’ people who have not been baptized. So baptism is not a final designation, but baptism certainly points the direction someone is heading in eternity or where they want to head in eternity, towards God’s presence or not towards God’s presence.

And God shows this event we hear of today in the Gospel according to Luke, that

in that act of baptism God approves of baptism so firmly that God even has a no-name prophet in a no name place to baptize God's only Son. Later in the New Testament, in the letter to the Ephesians and in the letters of Peter do we hear how God dealt with those who did not have the Messiah to follow in their time and place before the birth of the Messiah. God's Messiah descended to the dead right before his resurrection, as we say in our Creeds, and God's Messiah preached the Gospel to all those in hades who came before him, and he brought up to heaven all those who believed in him through his preaching. This

is a formal belief of the Orthodox and Catholic church, of which we Episcopalians are a part.

And in the Eucharist, we celebrate today we are remembering where we came from, who we follow, and how we have been saved for all eternity. And we eat this sacred meal each week to remind us of who is our Messiah and which God we serve.

So in a way each and every Sunday is the beginning of the rest of our lives. Here in the Eucharist we remember the events of long ago, how our Messiah came to save each of us who believe in him. And in this remembrance, we become born anew to take

on Christ's task of bringing the Good news to everyone else we may have influence over. We the baptized are all children of the Light that came into the world.

Amen.