

BAPTIZING WITH WATER, SPIRIT AND FIRE



THIS IS MY SON, THE BELOVED, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED.

Scripture:

Psalms 29

1. Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
2. Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.
3. The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.
4. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
5. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
6. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.
7. The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
8. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
9. The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'
10. The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever.
11. May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Isaiah 42

1. Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
2. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
3. a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.
4. He will not grow faint or be crushed; until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
5. Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:
6. I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,
7. to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.
8. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
9. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Acts 10: 34-43

34. Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
35. but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.
36. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ - he is Lord of all.
37. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:

38. how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.
39. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;
40. but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,
41. not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.
42. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.
43. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

Matthew 3: 13-17

13. Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.
14. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'
15. But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented.
16. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up! from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.
17. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'



BAPTIZING WITH WATER, SPIRIT AND FIRE

Grab what you have. Grab what you love best and run from the house. Fire! Or maybe just a fire drill. Did you practice fire drills in your growing up? Do you still practice that? If a fire should come, what would you grab and take with you?

I've got so much stuff, it would be hard for me to sort out what I could carry in one trip. But when I conferred with my wife about this a while back, I said, "I would grab you." Save those we love best, and then start over anew after the fire has taken its ravages of time.

John the Baptist said that Jesus will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. So what does that mean for us, what is the baptism in our life or the fire or the spirit that is to come?

YOUR BAPTISM

I wonder if any of you remember your baptism. For many Christians it happens as an infant for families bring their newborn children to be baptized, to be committed as part of the church. Sometimes there are those who have not been baptized as infants and come when they are making their commitment to join the church, and are baptized at that time. Do you remember your baptism? Remember a time when we baptized children, infants or when we baptized those who

were joining the church as adults? Perhaps you have heard stories of baptism.

A STORY OF A BAPTISM

I have a story of baptism from my father who was a pastor. One Christmas Eve at a candlelight service, young people in the communicants' class who had done their study were being presented to the congregation to join the church. One of the young people had not been baptized as an infant, so he was not only joining the church, but was being baptized at that time. So in the mood of the candlelight and the service, my dad opened up the baptismal font and saw that someone had forgotten to fill it with the water. He didn't want to break the mood of this beautiful time and just broke out in a cold sweat. He rubbed his hand over his head and dipped it through the empty baptismal font and baptized that young man.

I did not hear that story until many years later because I think it may have been one of my childhood friends that had that experience. But no one knew at the time.

I tell this story because it symbolizes that you don't need to have all the equipment, because God will provide.

GOD WILL PROVIDE

It's a story like the ram in the thicket when Isaac was about to be sacrificed by Abraham, and he said, "Where's the sacrifice?" Abraham said, "The LORD will provide." And there was the ram in the thicket.

Then there is the history of the Israelites with Moses escaping the captivity in Egypt, wandering through the wilderness. What are we going to eat? The LORD will provide. And then there was manna, a bread-like substance that appeared every morning for them to eat.

No matter what situation you find yourself in, God will provide a way. God provides a way by showing us through the scriptures not only what happened to people a long time ago, but what is happening in our lives, even now. I believe that those characters are not only people that lived a long time ago, but they are characteristics of ourselves, characters that live within us and show us what the human spirit can do, what we can do, what choices we have, what mistakes we made and how God blesses us all along the way.

JESUS' BAPTISM

It seems that Jesus, when he came to his baptism, left behind the idea of being perfect, because he came to be baptized by John. John was preaching a baptism for repentance of sin.

Now the early church had a lot of difficulty with this scripture because the concept was if Jesus is sinless and perfect, why does he need to be cleansed from sin? But there is a clue in the scripture, for Jesus says, "We're doing this because it is fitting and right." We're doing this for righteousness, for justice, because it is a new commitment, a time for Jesus, who up to that point was most likely in the carpentry shop doing his work as a carpenter. Then he took on a new role as teacher, as rabbi, healer, as an authoritative teacher. He made a commitment and that began at the time when he was baptized. John agreed to baptize Jesus, even though he was reluctant at first. Jesus began his ministry at that point, symbolized by the water of baptism there in the Jordan River. Then came the voice from heaven, that thundering voice from God like you heard in Psalm 29 that can knock everything over.

At this point, it was a message in the gospels of Luke and Mark. It is a personal message to Jesus: You are my son.

But in Matthew's gospel, it is an announcement to the community: This is my son. Listen to him, pay attention to him. It's an announcement to the community that there is a new leader.

So here we have a community like the community of the church, focusing on a new beginning.

GOD'S LOVE FOR US IS GREAT

In the books of Isaiah and Acts, from which we had scriptures this morning, God is creating humanity in the divine image. God's love for us is so great that God embraces all people, no exceptions. That's good news for us because we are loved by God. What God is like and who God wishes us to be comes to light in this scripture.

THREE FEASTS OF LIGHT

In the ancient church, there were three feasts of light that illuminate God's nature. First was the epiphany which we celebrated last week. The Wise Men recognized the true nature of the Christ Child. Then there's the wedding at Cana where Jesus did his first miracle. And there is this one, the baptism of Jesus that we are celebrating today. In these, we see that we are created as creatures beloved by God. Therefore we have responsibilities. This is a call to the community of faith, the church, for us to be witnesses to peace. In a cruel and violent world we need peace; we need to witness to that peace. That's what God calls us to do, to hope in face of despair.

WORDLY POWERS

The worldly power at Jesus' time was the Roman Empire that had conquered that province out in the outlands of Palestine. There were Roman rulers. Today we have dictators in various parts of the world, corrupt and selfish people, weapons' traders, war profiteers, all kinds of destruction and difficulties. Christians are called not to follow that kind of power, but to follow a greater power, and baptism marks us that way, to follow the power that

comes from God whose voice can do all those powerful things, and who makes us part of his purpose.

WE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE

There are all kinds of natural disasters: earthquakes, wind, storm, fire, and human difficulties with conflict, strife and war that are caused by human kind. But throughout all of that, we are given strength and power and a story that tells us who we are. The scriptures tell us that we are God's people, baptized into this community, a community of faith.

God will provide, like the ram in the thicket, the manna in the wilderness, the sweat from your brow. So don't sell yourself short. Your spirituality is that which God can use. God will use you, your gifts and your talents. So when you grab what you love best and run from the fire, know that you have treasures in heaven that are built because you have shown God's love in community, in the world, to stand up to the powers that are oppressing the earth.

So that is the good news for today. God's love is great for you today and for all time.



Dr. Peter Maier
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
January 13, 2008