

Luke 3:15-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.”

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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.”

Playing with Fire

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Luke 3:15-22*

This morning we are let into a bit of family intrigue. John the Baptist and Jesus are kin. You remember the wonderful scene when the two expecting mothers, Elizabeth and Mary meet, when Mary goes to visit her relative.

As an aside and a bit of a continuation of the theme of last week, this is another case in which the next may not say exactly what we remember it says. I always think of Mary going to visit her cousin Elizabeth, but the Bible doesn't tell us they are cousins. It tells us they are related, but the Bible doesn't say how they are related. It's not a very significant point, but I thought you might be interested.

But what is important is that when these two women kinfolk embrace each other, we become aware of two very special births that will visit this one family—the birth of John, who will later be called the Baptist, and the birth of Jesus who will later be called the Christ.

In the passage for this morning, many years have intervened. John and Jesus are now grown men. And even now these two relatives are connected closely. John is carrying out his ministry in the desert and baptizing in the Jordan. Jesus comes on the scene at what is to be the beginning of his public ministry. On the bank of the Jordan that day they are kissing kin.

But there is a problem, too. John and Jesus are closely aligned, they are kin, but they are also competitors, it turns out. They are both preachers. They each have their own disciples. And though they are related and friendly, the story of Jesus' ministry must also be the story of the decline and fading of John's ministry. Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, must now become the sole protagonist in the story, and John the Baptizer must drop out of the scene.

One very interesting way to read about this moment in the Gospels is to look at the stories from their literary perspective. It is often said that the winners get to write history. If that is so, then, in a sense, Jesus' followers, those who wrote the Gospels, get to tell us their side of how things transpired. They get to explain how the competition between John and Jesus unfolded. In political language, they get to spin the story.

Biblical scholars, who are a suspicious lot by and large, often view the narratives in this way. They want to see how Jesus' followers go about writing John out of significance. It's actually an interesting exercise, kind of fun. Ask yourself, how does Luke's story-telling make John subordinate to Jesus? Can you think of some? Well, let me help a bit. Remember when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth? How does Elizabeth greet Mary? She says, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Even before John is born, we have his own mother cry out that Jesus is the truly special one. And then, what happens when John and Jesus are grown? "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.'" Here we have John himself make

it very clear that Jesus is the truly worthy one. We know that in fact many of John's followers continued to follow him. Biblical scholars speculate that John's followers would have told the story with a different spin. I suspect they are right.

But in a sense we have a much more important question to answer. And that question is, can we get beneath the spin? Can we learn the true and essential differences between John and Jesus? And if we can, can what we learn help guide our faith and our life?

From everything we can tell, John is quite like a 60s campus radical. He stands for truth and justice. He has no patience for the leaders, whom he call hypocrites. He is loud and belligerent and angry. "John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'"

Even as John tells his listeners that Jesus is the real Messiah, he does it with a bite. "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... 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." Even as John acknowledges Jesus as the one whose sandal he is not worthy to tie, he describes Jesus as but a more powerful and violent version of himself.

John's imagery is filled with fire. And the fire he has in mind is destructive. It is the wrath to come. It is the fire that consumes the trees that do not bear good fruit. It is the unquenchable fire that will burn chaff.

From John we get the eternal fire that is the punishing fire of hell. It is the just reward for the wicked; it is the deserved fate of the unrighteous; it is the violent and justified end of the evildoers.

The imagery of fire is a potent one, a burning one, a voracious one. On these recent freezing nights, we see the news footage of unquenchable flames leaping through windows and rooftops as homes are ravaged and turned to an unlikely visage of black charred wood draped in shimmering icicles. Belongings and memories are lost, and very often lives are extinguished by the flame and smoke. In nearly every land nearly every day we see the burned out wrecks delivered by fire bombs and rockets. The brick ovens of Buchenwald and Auschwitz stand as nauseating reminders of the depth to which human depravity can sink. Fire is painful and punishing, and according to John the Baptist it is the deserved result for those he despises.

*** I have always had an interest in the Shakers. Part of the interest is no doubt caused by a certain antiquarian streak. But another part is related to their theology. Do you know why the Shakers built such orderly villages and lived such orderly lives? Largely they were trying to build their idea of God's kingdom on earth. They were trying to replicate the eternal realms in the here and now.

I suppose that sounds a little odd, but in the end I'm not so sure. I wonder if that impulse is not far more common than I might have supposed. I wonder if, in fact, most of us do pretty much the same thing. In fact, it makes a good deal of sense. If it's good enough for God, surely it's good enough for us. If it's how God does things, surely it ought to be how we strive to do things. It is little wonder, then, that our theology, that the way we believe God does business shows up rather obviously in the world, shows up in our own beliefs and actions and rationalizations.

John the Baptist's theology was the theology of the unquenchable fire. It was the theology of the bounteous harvest for the good guys and the wrath to come for the bad guys. And that theology is still alive and well in Christianity, and many other religious traditions, too. John's theology is still much in vogue today, and so are the human ways of doing business that go along with it. Our nation talks of the axes of evil, and from that we discern an obligation to visit upon them conflagration as we stand firm for what is right. Islamic extremists believe that American society is evil and must be obliterated in the firestorm and are jubilant when the Trade Center Towers erupt in a ball of fire. Genocides take place in Rwanda and Bosnia, Germany and Romania, and a hundred other lands because it is justified to visit the unquenchable fire upon one's enemies. On last Wednesday I went to Tremont Temple in Boston to listen to the opponents to gay marriage, and I heard them speak of the evil in our midst, evil, they said, that threatens the very fabric of our society if it is not consumed in the raging blaze of the righteous. The theology of John the Baptist is alive and well, indeed.

And John said of Jesus, "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." The question is this, Is Jesus the heir to John's theology? Is Jesus more or less a continuation of John? Does Jesus promote the theology of the unquenchable fire? Does Jesus accept the mantle that John the Baptist lays upon him?

One clue that John and Jesus are not on the same page is that they are competitors, that they don't join forces, that they don't become a team. Jesus' followers go to great pains to distinguish themselves from John. In the Gospel of Luke, which is the version of the story we read this morning, John doesn't even baptize Jesus. According to Luke's account John is already in prison when Jesus is baptized. This account puts even more distance between John and Jesus than the other Gospels do.

Also, at Jesus' baptism itself, the Holy Spirit comes down onto him as a dove. The Holy Spirit descends upon him via the dove, via the symbol of life and peace. And then God says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." God's words to Jesus are about love and about being pleased. They are not about the wrath and anger of God. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, the break from John's message of destruction by the unquenchable fire could hardly be more clear. Jesus is on a different course from John.

After Jesus' baptism, he is tested in the desert by the Devil. And then he returned to Nazareth. He returned to Nazareth and performed his first act of ministry. As his first statement in ministry, he went into the synagogue, and he read from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And after he left the synagogue, he immediately went to Simon's house where he healed the sick and the lame. It would be easy to go on and on, for Jesus' ministry is filled with such acts and such messages. He cleanses the lepers; he heals the paralytics; he associates with the hated tax

collectors; he tells all who listen to love not just their neighbors, but their enemies also; he tells the story of the Good Samaritan and of the Prodigal Son and of the Lost Sheep; and he bless the children; he feeds the five thousand. What a far cry from John's angry fire! Jesus is as different as night is from day. In Jesus we have the most loving and healing presence imaginable. He shows us the profound truth that underlies the seemingly simple children's hymn, Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Yes it does. Yes it does.

None of this is to say that Jesus does not have warnings for us. He says blessed are the poor and the hungry, but he also says woe to the rich and the full. And when he speaks to the unrepentant cities, he sounds more than a little like John the Baptist: "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades." But Jesus always utters the woes with regret and hope for a better outcome on his lips. John spews an angry fire. Jesus, on the other hand, makes it clear that if you play with fire, you will get burned; not as punishment, but simply as consequence. But he uses the imagery of fire sparingly, for Jesus knows that the imagery of the unquenchable fire is dangerous and counterproductive.

Jesus sets before us both a promise and an example, both, as the old hymn says, for our dear sake. "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." This same Spirit, and this same statement from God were present at your baptism as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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