

Sermon Preached on  
First Sunday after the Epiphany  
(January 10, 2016)  
8 a.m.: Of (Fire and) Water and Fire  
10 a.m.: Pageant

If I were to give this sermon a proper title, instead of "Of Water and Fire" I would call it "Of Fire and Water and Fire." Because this Gospel, together with the Acts of the Apostles, include all three.

Let's start with the Gospel. John the Baptist is doing his Baptist thing. He's baptizing, but first he's prophesying. He describes the terror of the coming age. The one who is to come after him will bring his winnowing fork and separate the wheat from the chaff and burn the chaff in unquenchable fire.

The fire he's talking about is a fire of destruction. It is a fire of death and loss. Those who are unworthy will burn eternally. It truly is terrifying. It's the fire before grace. Before mercy. Before baptism.

But then, there's the baptism of Christ himself. Now, notice that in Luke's gospel, Jesus and John do not speak to each other before the baptism. Not a word. For all we know, Jesus just slips in with the rest of the crowd, and John has no idea that he is The One.

It's only after the baptism that God speaks, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

So, after all the talk of fire, we get the water of baptism. Why fire? Why water? Simple, both are essential to life, and both are deadly. As dangerous and destructive as fire is, it was essential to living, then as now. And water? Well, they lived in an arid climate.

Water was a prize beyond compare. But in desert environments, water was tricky. They were prone to sudden, unpredictable storms. Flash floods were lethal.

Fire and Water. Life and Death. Perfect for baptism because baptism is death. In it, we renounce the ways of this world. We die to our former selves - our self-centeredness, our security, our contempt of and indifference toward others, our greed, and most especially a life in which God is not master. When we go down into the water, we kiss it all goodbye. We die to it. Joyfully.

When we rise up again from the depths, it is to a new life. A life of freedom from the worldly pursuits and passions, and above all its fears. We know our home and we know God's peace, and that is enough. That is our life.

But there is more. Because after that water, there is another fire. Not of destruction but of Spirit. In Acts, Peter and John encounter a group who have been baptized but do not know the Holy Spirit. When the disciples lay hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit, life changes again.

For the record, do you remember what it looked like when the apostles received the Holy Spirit? That's right. Fire. It came down like fire.

Only the fire of the Holy Spirit illuminates. It burns within. It gives strength and passion and power and courage. With it, we can love bravely, unabashedly. We open our eyes and see - truly see - God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

This is what drives us to go beyond merely coming to church on Sunday - as important to our spiritual health as that is. This is what drives us to reach out beyond ourselves, beyond our comfort.

So, fire can be destruction, burning our own spiritual chaff away. Or in another image, burning the dross from the precious metal. It destroys what is worldly in us. Water, it kills our entire life without Christ. And fire again - igniting our hearts and souls with the Holy Spirit which powers us in Christ's mission.

My prayer for all of us then, "Never forget that water which gave you birth in Christ. And live in the passion of the fire." Amen.