

Isaiah 43:1-7 - New Revised Standard Version

1-7 But now 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 - New Revised Standard Version

15-17 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."

21-22 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."

First the good news: Last week Ruth Golthwaite included a test question in her sermon. There is no question later in today's message. You're welcome. Of course, that means that there is no opportunity to garner Super Bonus, Gold Star, Extra Jesus Points either so it kind-of balances out. The other good news, though, is that if I were to include a test question, and if you saved your answer from last week you could use the same answer again. You'll remember Ruth's question from last week; "In today's text what did Jesus say?" As it turns out, for the second week in a row we have a gospel message where Jesus doesn't speak. And for the second week in a row it is God who has the line. As a matter of fact, in these two texts Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration we have the only times God speaks in the gospels. And in both cases God is affirming Jesus and his authority. Last week we were counseled to listen to him. This week God actually passes judgement on Jesus, declaring; "With you I am well pleased." This passing of judgement at Jesus' baptism really establishes his authority to engage in the ministry to which God called him. Passing judgement in this manner is not something we commonly associate with baptism. So the concept might not leave you a bit unnerved at this point. But just wait till we're done today.

There's a conventional wisdom that says a sermon should have three points and a quote. I used to follow that wisdom. I've gotten away from it in recent years, but today our gospel text

has three distinct messages. I'll take that as a sign.

Point one

We start with verse 21 and the part of the story many of us will find very familiar. 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." These two verses are the ones I think I'm supposed to talk about today. It's the classic image of Jesus' baptism. It recounts one of the few events that is reported in all four gospels; so it's clear that this is a really important event. And, yes, we will come back to this point before we're done today, but for now we need a little more background.

Which leads us to...

Point two

Next we turn back to the beginning, to verse 15 where John answers the question about whether he is the Messiah: 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. The people were filled with expectation. They wanted to know if John – this Nazarene; this man of the wilderness who (Mark tells us) "...was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and who ate locusts and wild honey." They wanted to know if this prophet who gathered crowds by preaching a baptism of repentance was the Messiah.

From an early age I was taught that Jesus was an unlikely Messiah. His message of unconditional love, childlike acceptance, radical self-sacrifice; while definitely subversive, was certainly not what the people of the time were expecting. In my Sunday School classes I learned that they were hoping for a war leader riding in on a white stallion ushering in a return of the glory days of the Maccabees; someone who would rally the people to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression.

It's a great image, but it most certainly does not describe John. By asking John if he was the Messiah it sounds like the people were looking less for a military leader and more for a subversive revolutionary; less a George Patton and more a Mahatma Gandhi.

Who knew that God would send a Dali Lama, a Nelson Mandela, a Martin Luther King Jr.?

And while John made it clear that he was nowhere near "messiah status" he also seems to have his own, somewhat different expectations of the Messiah: I baptize you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Whatever the crowd was expecting, the reference to the Holy Spirit and fire would have reminded them of Isaiah, whose unclean lips were purified by a burning coal.

From Isaiah chapter 6: And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" And he said, "Go and say to this people: ...and it goes downhill from there.

That's the passage the people would have recalled when John talked about baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. What was he saying? Were they, like Isaiah, to be called on to pronounce judgment on their fellow Israelites? "No, that's not it at all. John, you're confused. We're the good guys. The Romans are the problem. We just need someone to kick them out." I may be very wrong, but my guess is that John's reference to fire was confusing to them. Little did they know. Fast forward a few weeks (for us; a few years for them) and we find ourselves at Pentecost as tongues of fire descend from heaven, bringing the Holy Spirit, baptizing the gathered disciples – baptizing us – for the work ahead; empowering them (and us); to call the people to greater righteousness, to heal the sick, to care for the elderly, to bring comfort to those who mourn, to speak out on behalf of those who have no power and no voice.

That's what it means to be baptized by the Holy Spirit and fire.

Point three

If John's reference to the baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit was an eye opener, verse 17 turns it up a notch. 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."

This is apocalyptic language. Clearly John intends his baptism "for the forgiveness of sins" to be a means of cleansing those who are preparing for the final apocalyptic battle. Later Old Testament Prophets had spoken of "the Day of the Lord" – that day when God would, well, there was some measure of disagreement about what God would actually do on that day, but one thing was certain. It would be the day when the righteous would be vindicated and the unrighteous would be doomed. John's audience would almost certainly not miss his reference to that great and terrible day.

So that's the scene: Man from the desert, camel's hair tunic, beard and long hair, preaching hell-fire and brimstone and winnowing forks to Scribes and Pharisees and common folk, baptizing those who would repent of their sins; preparing them for the Day of the Lord...

...and in walks Jesus.

Back to Point One

John knew who Jesus was – likely in more ways than one. Their mothers had a close kinship. John and Jesus had probably traveled to the temple together every year since they were babies. They were the same age. They certainly knew each other as cousins. On another level, it was John who had first recognized Jesus as the Messiah – when they were both in utero. John not only knew who Jesus was, he really knew who Jesus WAS! Jesus was the last person John would expect to baptize. In Matthew's account John says as much:

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus responded that it was “...necessary to fulfill all righteousness.” I’m sure that’s so. It was so for Jesus and it’s so for us today. Through baptism we, too, fulfill righteousness; we are “made right with God”.

But wait, there’s more. It’s only a brief reference, but it will help us to understand the significance of baptism; yours, mine, Jesus’s.

The reference is in chapter 10 of the book of Acts. Peter is in Joppa. He is dozing (sorry, praying) in the roof-top garden of the house where he is staying and he has the dream of the sheet; sheet lowered, all kinds of animals, God says ‘Eat,’ Peter says ‘I can’t eat them, they’re unclean’, God says ‘Don’t call what I’ve made ‘unclean’.’; this happens 3 times; then the servants from Cornelius arrive. Cornelius is a Roman, a Centurion, and a ‘God Fearer.’ ‘God Fearer’ is New Testament language to describe people who were Jewish in every way except that they weren’t actually Jewish. They would attend synagogue, follow Jewish food laws and such. They’re a very interesting part of the spread of Christianity in the first century, but that’s a discussion for another time. For today we just need to know that Cornelius is a non-Jew who worships God. And Cornelius has had his own vision – to ask Peter to come and chat. Peter goes and talks about Jesus.

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

When we talk about baptism we often use words like “Marked” or “Claimed by God” or “Grafted onto the tree of life”. But that’s not what’s going on here. Clearly Jesus’ baptism is something else altogether. Yes, there is water, cleansing if you will; but then the heavens open and a dove descends. And suddenly, Peter tells us, while John is baptizing Jesus, God is anointing him. Anointing him for the work ahead, anointing him for the challenges he will face, throughout his ministry and even to the cross.

And when you put it like that, baptism is really kind-of frightening. This is serious stuff! And nobody said it would be easy, this being baptized, claimed, anointed. But like Isaiah told us this morning, God will be with us.

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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

We, in the west, know something of rivers – both their life-sustaining goodness and their

destructive power. But I don't think God is telling us to take this passage literally. We aren't being called to walk through actual rivers any more than we are called to walk through actual fire. I think what God is really saying is that we will encounter trials. We will have good reason to be afraid. This is a scary world, a scary time. But we have the assurance that God will be with us. No matter what happens, no matter where we find ourselves there is nothing that can separate us from God's love. It is that love, that assurance that allows us, who have been baptized by fire and the Holy Spirit, to step out with courage, to speak out with conviction, to offer love and compassion to everyone we meet.

That's the three points. Now for the quote.

I'm not a great football fan. Actually, most years I count it a "good football year" even if the only game I watch is the Super Bowl. This year was not a "good football year." It seems that a Sunday afternoon nap had a higher priority. Still (or maybe I should say "So") I was very interested to hear that Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman had been called on to read an original poem at this year's game. Her poem honors the three "Honorary Captains" selected by the National Football League: Educator Trimaine Davis, Nurse Manager Suzie Dorner, and Marine Veteran James Martin. And though it speaks of them, it speaks to all of us; called out, baptized, anointed, empowered to live into our baptism and our calling. The poem is titled *Chorus of the Captains*.

*Today we honor our three captains
For their actions and impact in
A time of uncertainty and need.
They've taken the lead,
Exceeding all expectations and limitations,
Uplifting their communities and neighbors
As leaders, healers, and educators.*

*James has felt the wounds of warfare,
But this warrior still shares
His home with at-risk kids.
During COVID, he's even lent a hand
Live-streaming football for family and fans.*

*Trimaine is an educator who works nonstop,
Providing his community with hotspots,
Laptops, and tech workshops,
So his students have all the tools
They need to succeed in life and in school.*

*Suzie is the ICU nurse manager at a Tampa Hospital.
Her chronicles prove that even in tragedy, hope is possible.
She lost her grandmothers to the pandemic,
And fights to save other lives in the ICU battle zone,
Defining the frontline heroes risking their lives for our own.*

*Let us walk with these warriors,
Charge on with these champions,
And carry forth the call of our captains!
We celebrate them by acting
With courage and compassion,
By doing what is right and just.
For while we honor them today,
It is they who every day honor us.*

The water of baptism is symbolic, really.

When we baptize, we speak of the water; how God's spirit moved over the face of the deep in creation, how Noah and his family were saved from the cleansing waters of the flood, how Moses and the Hebrew people were saved at the parting of the red sea. We acknowledge how important water is to our understanding of God's goodness and God's will for our lives. Water is life-sustaining, necessary for all living things.

But in reality, the water of baptism is only symbolic. This water symbolizes the gift, the presence, the claim of God's Holy Spirit on our lives. It recognizes that God has judged us worthy and anointed us for the ministry set before us.

My prayer for us today is this; that throughout this strange and discouraging and hopeful and constantly changing year we, too, might feel the presence and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit – yet again, maybe for the first time, maybe in a new way.

My prayer for us today is that we find in that presence the calling, the strength, and the courage to respond – sharing God's love with everyone, in every way.

However the spirit comes to you, may it bring the power of God, the energy of fire, the unquenchable love of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Amen.