

Sermon for Sunday, January 13, 2019

“The Power of Baptism”

Baptism of Our Lord
First Sunday after Epiphany
January 13, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Both our first reading and our Gospel reading today talk about fire and water. Each of these things can be so very lovely and so very powerful.

Many of my happiest memories involve water. A few years ago, I got to spend my late October birthday canoeing the Upper Iowa River with my spouse Matt. It was a brilliant, crisp day - pure gift before dark November blew in. The sky was robin's egg blue with not a cloud in sight. The water reflected the color of the sky and sparkled with the sun. I felt so content on the beautiful river we get to enjoy here in Decorah.

Yet, this summer someone drowned in our river. And, that river wreaked so much destruction and heartache in the floods of 2008 and 2016, to name just a few years of flooding.

Water nourishes and renews us, helps us relax, lets us play.
Water gives life. We all pass through the waters when we are born.
Water can also kill and destroy.

The same is true for fire. Some of the most meaningful conversations in my life have been held around a fire. When I was a camp counselor, I was amazed at what campers would share in that setting. Kids who never sang anywhere would join in during campfire worship. Yet I've rarely felt as frightened as when I had to help evacuate campers when a forest fire came too close to camp. The smoke, the smell, the black sky were all so terrifying.

Fire provides warmth and light, a feeling of coziness. It nurtures intimacy and community. It has fueled so much innovation. It too can kill, ravage, destroy as we saw so dramatically in the Camp Fire last November.

Water and fire are beautiful gifts with tremendous power. We should not take them lightly. John the Baptist tells us that Jesus will baptize us with water, fire and the Holy Spirit. I think this means that being baptized into Christ Jesus isn't something that we should take lightly.

Baptism isn't just a lovely entrance rite, not just a sweet ceremony with an infant, or a rite of passage for a youth.

Baptism is not just a ritual. It is a way that our active, powerful God works in our lives and our world.

The images of water and fire also help us to see what God does for us through the gift of baptism.

With baptism, God does for us what water does. We pass through the waters to be reborn and named beloved children of God. We are given new life, we're renewed and nourished. Baptism also involves drowning and destruction. Our sinful selves are drowned; we die to sin and are raised to new life. We are marked with the sign of the cross, the sign of death and new life.

Through baptism, God also lights a fire within us - a fire of justice and mercy. We're told to let our light shine, to let our life bring the warmth of love - the fire of fierce compassion. We are also drawn into intimacy and community with Christ and the whole body of Christ on earth. Through baptism, God also burns away the chaff within us. We don't just get to sit around the campfire sing- ing "Kumbaya". We are convicted of sin and called to repent. All that is unfruitful and empty within us is burned away. This fire renews us the way a wildfire renews a natural landscape, the way a prairie fire sparks new growth.

We see that baptism does these things through the witness of scripture and through the witness of people and communities of faith throughout the ages who have experienced the power of baptism.

I know it's hard to believe that a ritual can do all these things, especially a ritual that many of us experienced as infants. But it isn't the ritual that does all this. It is the power of God working through water and fire and the Word. God uses these physical things to get through to us and not just when we are first baptized. Baptism is a life-long gift. God uses these signs to get our attention, to wake us up, to draw us back to God - over and over again. God works through water, fire, the Spirit and the Word throughout our lives to assure us of what God has done and is doing for us.

This is why we keep the font central in our worship space and focus our attention there as we confess our sins and remember our baptisms.

It is why we light the paschal candle at baptisms and funerals - this candle that is first lit in the fire of the Easter Vigil. This candle reminds us that when we pass through the fires and flames of sin and even death, we will not be overwhelmed; God will bring us into new life.

If you haven't been baptized, know that God is still at work in your life as well. God is always at work through the Holy Spirit. Yet, baptism is such a helpful gift for our lives of faith. It gives us physical assurance and physical reminders of God's activity for us. It is so powerful to know, in our bones, that God has claimed us through water, fire and the word of promise, and that God will not let us go.

This week, I invite you to pay close attention to water. After you receive communion today, go to the font and use the water to make the sign of the cross on your forehead. During the rest of the week, when you shower or wash your face, remember the power of God to drown your sinful self and give you new life and your true identity - beloved child of God. Say to yourself - I am beloved, I am forgiven, I am reborn.

I also invite you to pay attention to fire. Today, notice the fire burning on the paschal candle. Let yourself be drawn into the beauty, intimacy and the warmth of that fire. And, pay attention to what the fire needs to burn away within you.

During the rest of the week, notice what fire can do as you light gas burners on your stove or hear the combustion engine in a car fire up. Notice what fire can do and reflect that the tremendous power of fire doesn't hold a candle to the power of Almighty God.

That amazing power is at work in you - let it burn, let it shine.

Let it empower you to live out the promises we make when we affirm our baptisms:

To live among God's faithful people,

To hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper,

To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,

To serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and

To strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

God is at work today and always through the word and the Spirit, through water and fire, to do powerful things for you. God is at work to do powerful things for this congregation.

Beloved, you are reborn - let your light shine.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.