

At the 10:30 am service on January 10, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:1-16, 21-22.

“Water and Fire”

On my recent vacation I encountered water in many meaningful ways. I rode upon it in the Larkspur Ferry. I watched it heave and swell in the beautiful Steamer’s Lane Point at Santa Cruz (not much to write home about surfing wise but lovely nonetheless). I filled my bottles with reverse osmosis quantities. I drank it, swam in it and watched it pour down in buckets.

Water is a beautiful, useful, energizing and renewing substance. It is no wonder that it is used for one of the most meaningful enactments in the church: baptism. And yet it is surprising that we still baptize as John did, with water, after he exclaims: “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.” The “one” is Jesus!

After saying this, all the people and Jesus are baptized by John. Christians throughout history followed Jesus’ example and continued to be baptized by water. And by doing so the church adopted John’s baptism and incorporated what John calls “Jesus’ baptism.”

Since we will have a baptism today and in the process recall our own baptism and learn something about it if this is new to us I thought I’d unpack some of what baptism means by interpreting the biblical texts today.

John’s baptism is called a baptism of repentance. It is cleansing and renewing and water is a fitting symbol for this purpose.

Philosopher of religion and theologian, John Hick, writes in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* that all significant world religions have similar paths to salvation or liberation, from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness as he calls it, or as Christians say, from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. For John in our Gospel text, a self-centered person keeps more than he or she needs, accumulates more than his or her fair share, and exploits for economic gain. A God-centered person bears fruits worthy of repentance.

People come to John for baptism. John agrees in his heart to baptize them but speaks more of what baptism means. In reply to the question, “What then should we do?” his answers are quite modern: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.

The text continues: “Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He says to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’

“Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’”

Water was seen throughout biblical history as a mode for movement towards salvation or liberation or from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. People in Noah's day lived self-centered lives in dissipation and violence. God covered them with a flood and brought them to a new start in life. Moses led the Israeli people from slavery to freedom through the waters of the Sea of Reeds. The prophet Amos proclaims: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5:24).

In the Xhosa community in South Africa, young people much the same age as Zach and Ben make the transition from boyhood to manhood by circumcision. They are then painted with white ochre and sent into the wilds to fend for themselves against wild animals and to feed themselves on wild berries and what they can catch and after a month or so they return to their village but have to swim through a river to wash off the ochre as a cleansing and removing of the old self. They are received on the other side as men. Baptism is less painful than circumcision but the meanings are the same. Baptism incorporates one into the community, in our case the church. Swimming through a river or being baptized uses water as the cleansing and renewing agent.

In our culture, when young people make an affirmation of faith for themselves, as Zach and Ben are doing today, they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. We enter adulthood when we begin to think for ourselves. We become adult, active members of the church, by baptism and affirmation.

Each individual knows their own journey from self-centeredness to God-centeredness in baptism and affirmation. The beauty of baptism is that it brings us to the side of love, caring and compassion and that's where Jesus' baptism comes in. It's a baptism of Holy Spirit and fire.

In my final meeting with Zach, he asked me to clarify the meaning of the Holy Spirit. Both Zach and Ben asked excellent questions in the sessions leading up to their becoming members of the church. The questions were so significant that I could only provide provisional replies. But then, the church is a provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity. We're a learning, growing community. Our faith always seeks understanding, as St. Anselm said a thousand years ago.

I responded to Zach in my own words but would have done better if I quoted the statement in the constitution of our church. The denomination's latest affirmation of the Holy Spirit is included as an insert in your worship bulletin. The church encourages us to affirm these statements aloud in worship together.

When John states that Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit he means something like this. Let us say the statement together and thus affirm our own baptism by the Holy Spirit.

"Holy Spirit"
from
The Brief Statement of Faith

Presbyterian Church (USA)

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
 everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
 The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
 sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and
 neighbor,
 and binds us together with all believers
 in the one body of Christ, the church.

The same Spirit
 who inspired the prophets and apostles
 rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
 engages us through the Word proclaimed,
 claims us in the waters of baptism,
 feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
 and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.

In a broken and fearful world
 the Spirit gives us courage
 to pray without ceasing,
 to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
 to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
 to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
 and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
 we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
 and to live holy and joyful lives...

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If water implies cleansing and renewal, Holy Spirit and fire connote encouragement and enthusiasm. Jesus' baptism was his ministry of teaching, preaching, healing and challenging and the promise of the Holy Spirit to empower and inspire us after he was gone.

Like water, fire is a powerful image for ministry. A camp fire suggests stories. We tell the stories of faith. Fire can cause a lot of destruction as we see in the wildfires in California's forests but we cannot deny its force, energy and power. It's the energy given us in Christian baptism. We are expected to be fired up about our faith. And if we are not we can pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us.

It is fitting that the church began with flames of fire descending on the heads of despondent disciples. They were grieving Jesus' death but when the flames came upon them they began rejoicing and went out and changed the world with the amazing message of resurrection and new life.

Ben Girton and Zach Paulson became members of the church in a session meeting prior to the worship service today. Ben was baptized as an infant and therefore confirmed the faith his parents made on his behalf at baptism and Zach will be baptized after this sermon. They will repeat their affirmation.

The full benefits and effects of baptism are theirs in this service today. We wish them the best as they continue their journey of faith. They know that there are a whole lot of people out there – you all – who will love and support them in their journey.

Water and fire are theirs and ours this day.

In conclusion, we do well to quote Isaiah from our reading today:

“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.”

Amen.