

On New Year's Day some of my family and friends went on a hike in Montreat, NC. It was really strange to see how the strong force of Helene's tropical storm force winds and raging waters changed the terrain, likely for a long time. While hiking, some things looked familiar, and I remembered a story from almost twenty years ago when my dad, who is now deceased, was hiking with us at the same time of year. On that hike, we soon came upon a creek. There was no bridge. There were just rocks half submerged in icy cold mountain water. I extended my hand to help others navigate their path across. My dad's turn was next. I turned around to help him make his way, and he hesitated at the water's edge. No. He froze- paralyzed by fear and also by the stiffness of his legs, a side effect from an atypical Parkinson's disease that left him weak but determined to make this hike with his family. All I thought I had to do was to reach my hand out and that would be enough. Well, my dad quickly lunged forward, lost his balance and fell backwards into the bone chilling, breath taking mountain water, taking me down with him. Neither one of us was hurt...fortunately... well, maybe just our pride?! Sitting there in the freezing cold water, my backside completely soaked, I, at first panicked, and then I thought to myself... this is baptism! Instead of a sprinkling, we went for full immersion! Sometimes on Baptism of the Lord Sunday I experience whiplash from Scripture. We go from toddler Jesus to 30 year-old Jesus all in one week. Jesus' baptism appears in all four gospels (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11 and John 1:29-34), and they aren't the same. For example, only in Mark and Luke's gospels record this "you" address from the heavens. Matthew's version is "this." "**This** is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased"

(3:17). I wonder how much Jesus needed to hear that “you” in preparation for his earthly ministry. So, Jesus goes to his cousin, John the Baptist, to be baptized. But what’s interesting is that here in Luke’s gospel, John doesn’t appear to baptize Jesus, as he is in prison. Minds blown. Again, we have to pay attention to which version of the Gospel story we’re reading. Yet, Luke’s account still reminds us that John wasn’t worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals. So who, then, baptized Jesus? In Luke’s account, it was the Holy Spirit. Another reminder that “baptism is wholly God’s work so we can have confidence that no matter how often we fall short of fail, nothing that we do, or fail to do, can remove the identity that God conveys as a gift” (David Lose, workingpreacher.org). Luke is really trying to get us to see that John is not the Messiah. Jesus’ baptism will be different and Jesus will baptize differently. I know that your bulletin indicates that I’ll read selective verses in Luke 3, but I’m going to read Luke 3:15-22. But before we turn to God’s word for us today let us first **PRAY. READ.**

I must confess that while water is usually on my mind when speaking of Jesus’ baptism and baptism in general, “baptized with fire” stood out to me in a different way this week than before. Just as we may hear water differently from ours or our neighbors’ experience with Helene as well. With the devastation of fires around the LA area, I’m not just thinking about water, which is what John the Baptizer says is what he baptizes with but Jesus...he baptizes with fire. “Fire is a double image-one of threat and one of purification. In the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, fire guides and consumes. In the New Testament, fire is a powerful

spiritual image for the Holy Spirit and in today's reading, fire is linked to baptism. In colloquial English, we speak of a "baptism by fire," meaning an ordeal that serves as a rite of passage or an experience that proves one's mettle. That common phrase most likely originated in today's text-with the story of Jesus' own baptism" (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage* e-newsletter).

Isn't interesting that it's our nature to run towards fire instead of away from it?! Have you seen people this week on the news, including celebrities, taking garden hoses and trying to save theirs and neighbor's houses or rescuing pets or moving abandoned cars out of the road so that firetrucks can get through? You may think that FIRE might take place when Jesus is baptized, but it doesn't. "Like any biblical prophet, John warned that this fire-baptism would have dire consequences: "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." But something interesting happened when Jesus, the One who would baptize with fire, got baptized. Fire didn't actually show up in any expected way. The heavens opened (as they would later open in Pentecost with tongues of flame) and the Holy Spirit descended. The Spirit didn't come, however, as a phoenix, a flaming bird. But the Spirit arrived as a dove. And the ripping heavens and the holy appearance didn't thunder judgment. Rather, a Voice uttered: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" There's no threshing floor. There's no burning chaff. There's no vision of hell or eternal punishment" (Butler Bass). "Instead of burning those gathered up with unquenchable fire, Jesus comes in solidarity, to be God with us and God for us. Jesus is

baptized into our life, so that He could gift us His life” (Brian W. Thomas, [article](#)). Here there is only a naming and a claiming: only love through assurance. Notice that BEFORE Jesus has done anything...BEFORE he begins his public ministry, the voice from heaven calls him and through him- us- beloved. “Beloved” is not only Jesus’ identity but also ours as well. Baptism teaches us who we are- God’s beloved children- and also gives us the promise of God’s unconditional regard for each of us.

Theologian Rachel Held-Evans says “Baptism is a renunciation of all those competing voices that try to tell us who we are. The world gives us names according to the color of our skin, or who are parents are or aren’t, or where we went to school or didn’t go or how much money we make or don’t make or where we are from or not from. Names such as screw-up, cheater, fake, addict, loser. The world beckons with these other names but in baptism, just like Jesus, we’re named Beloved child of God and that is enough” (theworkofthepeople.com). There is no “we’ll be children of God when...” We’ll be children of God when we get our stuff together. We’ll be children of God when we get married and have children. We’ll be children of God when we stop mistreating our neighbor. We’ll be children of God when we beat the addiction. We’ll be children of God when we stop having doubts. **Friends, by God’s grace we’re children of God now!** Why do you think we greet one another this way in worship every week? To remind us all because we forget who and whose we are!

Baptism marks us, identifies us for the beginning of our faith journey not just for the end. In baptism, we die with Christ...we die to our old ways of life and are raised with Christ into a new way of living: to change how we make decisions, to change how we treat others and ourselves, to change the way that we live and give of ourselves... not just once a year but every day of every year! One scholar puts it this way, "Baptism declares that God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life- including those places in our own hearts- because that's where God works...that's where God gardens and pours out grace. Baptism reminds us that there's no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our anxiety, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair" (Held-Evans, p. 21 *Searching for Sunday*). Yet, upon our deaths here on earth, our baptisms will be complete. This week my friend was having a conversation with her loved one who was dying. He had lived a very long and full life, yet he was afraid and asked her as a pastor how she knew that he was loved and redeemed by God? My friend told him she knew because he was baptized. She said, "When you're afraid, remember your baptism. Remember that God loves and claims you because in life and in death, we belong to God." He died later that day. With Christ, Paul tells us in Romans that death nor evil has the final word. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus...nothing...not bad names, anxiety, depression, addiction...not even death. Herein lies the hope of the gospel! God's grace is present and real.

God's assurance- God's promise- holds true. Death is not the end. Out of death comes life...abundant, new life. In baptism each of us is called to ministry in Christ's name. Each one of us, so we can't use the excuse of we aren't worthy and beloved because God tells us through Jesus' baptizing us with fire through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are. Yes, I'm talking about each one of us.

Friends, "fire is frightening. It is a horror of torture and destruction, apocalypse and hell. We know the spiritual implications. We've seen the pictures. Perhaps we've even experienced the threat or the flames. But fire is something else as well- it burns off the chaff of delusion, falsity, and self-hatred. With this fiery baptism three things are revealed: the true self, the central meaning of existence, and a holy welcome.

Identity, love, and acceptance. And that might be why we run toward fire, even when warned away" (Butler Bass). Some of us may hear these words that the voice from heaven said as trite or cliché. I understand that, and I also invite you to hear them as maybe trite but also very true. For in hearing God's word spoken to our ancestors in faith, our own lives become open to these promises that are as valid today as they were then. Ask yourself if you have truly received God's love and grace? It's one thing to read or hear these words and nod your head with the preacher but how can you really take them in and live them as if they're true?! "Whether in water or in fire, we are worthy of saving, even as we are willing to save others. We are beloved, cherished by God. And with us, God is pleased. The fire and water may destroy some things, even precious life, but they don't consume who we really are. Instead, they

reveal truth. We are God's beloved. As a "reformed" Christian, I believe that baptism should only be conducted once- Ephesians 4:5- "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." However, baptism was never intended to be a once-and-done event, but rather something we remember and renew daily (Lose). And so we're going to remember our baptisms shortly. Friends, "there are bound to be many fires this year- actual and metaphorical, environmental and political, private and public. Remember the dove and voice. You are not alone. You are beloved. You are embraced" (Butler Bass). Thanks be to God! Amen.