

SERMON- Baptism of our Lord (C)

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Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8:14-17

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

January 12, 2025

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Psalm 29

OPENING:

During Epiphany, some Churches have an event where everyone brings in their Christmas trees and they light them on fire on the church grounds for all the neighborhood to see.

I suggested that to my family yesterday that we do that here at St. Tim's: my son thought it was a great idea

but my wife had a concern about it being illegal with the Town and.

If they were to come and ask what we were doing, we could reply:

“We are fighting fire with fire.”

“We are fighting fire with fire.”

Today we hear about Jesus' Baptism so we think “WATER” while we also read about John the Baptist and “FIRE.”

Likewise, all week, we have been dealing with WET SNOW and COLD here. while we also have been hearing about FIRE and DRY WIND in California.

My heart has been broken by the images from the West Coast, of lives lost, of homes having been incinerated by the wildfires.

The destruction even includes an Episcopal Church, St. Mark's in Altadena.

So when we hear John the Baptist say about Jesus:

“He will Baptize you with the Holy Spirit *and* fire.” It hits a little different this week.¹

Normally, for this sermon, I could talk about the natural world and how the process of combustion in a forest actually helps the ecosystem. How fire from the hottest cauldron makes the sharpest sword. Hal Hallett, former Sunshine State resident, reminded me that there is such thing as a controlled burn for fire prevention.

But our hands are so close to the flame this week, we must explore this metaphor of fire cautiously.

Like those gathered at the Jordan, we are rightfully terrified by fire, wondering what it all means, asking questions like:

“why ‘fire’?” “Where did it come from?”

And, most important, “Will it hurt me?”

¹ Luke 3.16b

LITURGY

Again, we don't usually think about "Fire" with baptism.

Pentecost, maybe...

But, actually, fire is right there in our Baptismal service, it's the first thing that we will say today as we renew our own baptismal vows.

The first thing we do is "fight fire with fire"—so to speak.

It's right there on page 6/5, they are called the Renunciations, right off the bat, we renounce evil and renounce Satan.²

It always feels a little weird—kind of jarring—especially with infant baptism to say that.

It's strange for us Episcopalians, the "frozen chosen"... to heat things up, from the beginning.

The first thing we talk about in our life of faith is renouncing EVIL, renouncing Satan.

We will never be confused with more "fire & brimstone" denominations, but consider *also* our marriage service.

There's a prayer there that reads: "Defend them (the couple) from every enemy"

And all the language about:

"In their joys and in their sorrows"...

"For better for worse"...

"In this sinful and broken world"³

Again, we fight fire with fire.

SIN

It's interesting that a frequent criticism of the Episcopal Church is that we don't ever talk about that sort of thing.

Follow the line of thought: the criticism is that we offer a solution (God is all-loving) to a problem that does not exist (because there is no sin).

To stay with our fire metaphor,

it's like saying, don't worry, the Fire Department is going to show up at your house and douse it with water,

but you are confused because you don't believe that there is a fire there in the first place.⁴

² *Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 292.

³ *Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 424,429, 430, ff.

⁴ Frank Wade paraphrase.

FIRE

I am not sure if that's a fair criticism, judging from our liturgy and from our use of Scripture.

In the end, though, I believe that we are all like the people in the gospel, we are gathered at the River Jordan, wondering whether we really need to be baptized with water, much less with fire.

I get scared when John talks about Jesus with the winnowing fork and fire. But I should not be.

Because we believe in a Savior,
who will rush into the burning buildings of your life,
extinguish the fire,
even "walk through fire with you"⁵
and rescue you.

Besides who wants to fight the blaze by oneself.
"Come Holy Spirit come, come with Fire," we should be saying.

The Good News is that the Holy Spirit does come, and not just as a Dove, but as Fire.

The Good News is that we have this cleansing, purgative, regenerative, fire.

Not to get too Revelation-y with you but remember during COVID when there was the Delta and the Omicron, and all these Greek letters.

Guess what?

God says to the global pandemic, or to whatever fire we are facing:
"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

The hard part is that sometimes, we don't get to see it, how all that works in our lives, but again there's the model from natural world, where in some places vegetation, fynbos and jack pine cone seed, grows and regrows via this low grade fire that fertilizes the soil and promotes new growth.

You cannot see the fire happening in those cases but it's there.

At other times, there is indeed a gigantic fireball, a flameout, where God interrupts our lives and heals us with a conflagration for all to see. That's the ritualistic point of the Christmas Tree burnings at churches for Epiphany.

⁵ Isaiah 43.2c

CALIFORNIA

But then I think of those poor folks in California, how powerless they must feel, living in the richest city, in the richest country in the world, powerless in front of these fires.

How do we make sense of it?

There is a saying in ministry,
a short-hand expression that's just that, it's just a saying.

It goes:

“The bigger the house, the smaller the God.

The smaller the house, the bigger the God.”

I thought about it this week. Most of us, myself included, we hedge our bets and try to make God smaller, thinking that we can handle most things, that we have the fire-extinguisher, we have the celestial fire-insurance.

Then we are reminded, oh so painfully, that we cannot insulate ourselves, that there is not enough water to keep us from sin, or from self-immolation.

It's interesting: that church that I mentioned at the start, St. Mark's Episcopal in Altadena, they support a school in Haiti, St. Marguerite's. We do the same thing for St. Matthew's in Chapoteau. It made me think how we are all connected by our membership in the Episcopal Church, by our humanity by our baptism, by the reality of Christ's body.

And we all live on this one good green earth, hoping that we don't catch on fire.

So I think about those poor people in the Palisades, now joined with those poor people in Haiti, brothers and sisters in Christ, they are all going through the fire. Their houses are all the same size.

Hear me that I am not saying that God sent those fires in order to humble the Californians or something. Just that we will all, unfortunately, go through times of trial, through fire at some point.

CONCLUSION

By this point, your head might be spinning. Is he saying “Fire” is “good” or “bad”? I think they were asking the same about Jesus, someone once said about him:

“Jesus told so many parables, he became one”

I am doing the same around this metaphor, however poorly in comparison

So one last effort to close, we talked about weddings, today is the Baptism of our Lord, here is one about the Eucharist.

Do you remember drinking from the cup as a child? Drinking the wine?
I can remember blanching at how it tastes, how it made my breathe smell.
It's unpleasant, it's strange for our kids.

That's one of the reasons why we do it, because it's dangerous.

You don't get to do that outside of here, not legally, but here you do.

That's whole another sermon but it's another way of fighting fire with fire.

Church Father John Chrysostom said this about the Eucharist, but he could have been talking about Baptism or any part of the Christian life. Let's give him the last word: He says: "if you drink the true drink, true food, you will have life enough where you can come back from that table **like lions breathing out fire**, thus becoming terrifying to the Devil."⁶

AMEN

⁶ [CHURCH FATHERS: Homily 46 on the Gospel of John \(Chrysostom\) \(newadvent.org\)](http://newadvent.org)