

Winnowing  
Luke 3: 15-22

January 13, 2019  
Baptism Sunday

Good morning. As you have heard, today's lesson centers around the words and actions of John the Baptist and the subsequent baptism of Jesus. John, as you know, had a reputation for some rather harsh preaching, including hellfire and damnation. This should not be a surprise to us, since the Jordan river where he was preaching was not far from Jerusalem in the south section of Israel, as opposed to Nazareth where Jesus was from in the northern region of Galilee. This, of course, would make John a "southern" Baptist.

So let me ask: Were you ever baptized? Do you remember when it was? Do you know who performed it, or who was there? Of course, the most important question is, what happened? How did it change your life?

I was baptized the day I was born because I was scheduled for immediate surgery, and someone thought it was a good idea to call a priest. Being in Chicago at the time, I'm pretty sure it was a northern priest, not a southern priest. About that baptism I remember nothing, and if it had any effect on my life, I couldn't tell you what it was. I was also baptized as an adult in the Jordan river while on a tour of Israel. Most people I know would tell you that it didn't really do anything to improve my ornery disposition, despite the fancy venue.

According to the scripture passage for today, John baptized with water as he called people to live an authentic lifestyle according to the Jewish law and the ways of justice. His baptism was an outward sign of a person's willingness to change their ways. Yet admitting that he was not the Messiah, John pointed people to someone greater, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

For centuries, Biblical scholars have interpreted John's words as meaning that the purpose of this fiery baptism of Jesus was to separate out good people from bad people. The good people would be gathered into the barn, or heaven, while the bad people would be burned in hell with unquenchable fire. That is, I suppose, is one point of view, but it doesn't seem consistent with what we know of God's love or the purpose of salvation, which I understand as spiritual reclamation and recycling.

No, I think there is another interpretation here, and it has to do with the fact that John the Baptist uses a metaphor that everyone in his time could relate to. It is the metaphor of winnowing. After the wheat has grown and been harvested, the grain is loosened on the threshing floor, and then tossed into the wind to separate the wheat from the chaff. It is all part of the process of creating food to feed the hungry.

Let's be realistic. We can go to the grocery and buy bread to eat without ever experiencing the process that created that loaf of bread. But there is no going to a grocery store to buy packaged

spiritual life. There is a process. The process includes planting, growing, threshing, and winnowing before it can become something good and nourishing for people who are hungry.

Most of us can recall some very difficult or painful circumstance in our past lives. I can certainly remember a number of those times in my life; but nothing much compared to those of you who have survived combat, who have endured physical impairment. Nothing compared to you who have lost children, survived cancer, or endured as a caretaker for many years. The only thing that can get you through such times are the gifts of good friends along with God's mercy and grace, infusing your own courage and willingness to stick to it and do your best.

So, in a sense, one could say that you have been baptized by fire. On the other hand, using John's metaphor, perhaps you have, in fact, been winnowed by the hand of God, so that you could become bread for the hungry and food for the poor.

In this you are not alone. There are many sitting beside you in this sanctuary today that have endured the winnowing hand of God. And if you recall your Sunday School lessons, you will remember Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Jeremiah. When you read those stories you can see the winnowing hand of God. We see the twelve disciples of Jesus, along with Paul, Barnabas, Lydia and Chloe – all winnowed by the hand of God. And for what? Isn't it true that their stories and writings are still providing spiritual food for people like us centuries later?

So we need to be mindful about our own baptisms. The purpose of water baptism is not to create another number in the annals of the church. Baptism is the beginning of a journey through which we discover the unique and true self that was created for a purpose, and has a place in the body of Christ. It starts with water, but always requires fire.

In Biblical terms, fire is a metaphor for the destruction of the ego and purification. Fire is not some punishment from an angry God, but the necessary and sometimes painful process of separating the wheat from the chaff in our souls; it requires exposing our memories and our motives. It is the process of winnowing, where after being beat up by life, we are tossed by God into the wind of the Holy Spirit, who keeps what is good, and gently blows away that which is not. Of course, some of us need more than a gentle wind, if you know what I mean.

I don't know about you, but we human beings tend to resist the winnowing that brings us to our true selves, even though the object of it all is simple: it is to make us fit to be bread for those who are hungry for God; hungry for new life; hungry for hope.

So as we consider the baptism of Holy Spirit and fire that Jesus offers, this winnowing of the inner self, the passage that Luke has written for us gives us three things to ponder as we begin a new year.

First, if the baptism of Jesus is provided by the Holy Spirit, as John says it is; and if the Holy Spirit is our comforter and counselor, as Jesus taught, then we know we are dealing with a God who knows us as we are, accepts us wherever we begin, and helps us along the way. If this is true, then we who surrender to the winnowing can rest assured that the beginning and end of that process is goodness and life.

Second, while end of the winnowing process is good news, the squirmy news comes first. For example, if I tell my doctor that I have great pain and difficulty in my hip or in my shoulder, while the good news is that I have surrendered to the doctor, the squirmy news is that I may have to endure surgery and long process of rehab. Just so, in the winnowing process we have to be tossed about in order to separate wheat from chaff. No pain, no gain.

Finally, we always have the option to say no; to resist and to reject that baptism, that winnowing. The story that Luke provides for us today tells us that Herod had received a word of judgment from John the Baptist regarding his moral choices and his path, but instead of listening, he chose to imprison John because he wanted to shut out God's voice.

Herod may have been a king and a ruler, but like us, he was essentially human, driven by ego and instinct and fear. Is it possible that history could have been different, and the gospel stories different, if Herod gone to Jesus for help? Who knows? But in the realm of God, it is never too late to ask for help.

Luke's story concludes in this section with Jesus being baptized by John, humbling himself in the water before the crowd, knowing that even he would need the grace and help of his Father in heaven if he was to live each day until the end with truth and purpose. Very soon he would be led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for his baptism of fire, his own winnowing, in which he would choose his priorities and his motives. We know the rest of the story.

So, if Jesus had his winnowing, and if he promises the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our winnowing, then why should we be afraid?