

Sermon , December 4, 2022

Matthew 3:1-12
"Water and Fire"

Today marks one of the few times that we encounter John the Baptist in the church year, although he does play an important part in the development of the gospel. But who was this rather wild looking character dressed in animal skins, living on a diet of locusts and wild honey, - who has sometimes been described as the last of the Old Testament prophets, even though he is only found in the New Testament. We don't know for sure, but because of his radical style of life, he may have been a member of an ascetic group of Jews known as the Essenes. We also know through the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth that John and Jesus were related.

While in the region around the river Jordan , John the Baptist described himself, drawing from the Book of Isaiah, as "one crying out in the wilderness" preparing the way of the Lord. While at the river he was offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Apparently, John had quite a following, and as the text indicates, many of them were questioning whether or not he might be the long-awaited Messiah. It says that they were "filled with expectation". Perhaps there was something in the air that particularly made this charismatic, rather wild looking man, stand out as potential savior material.

But John was very self-aware of his own calling, and was quick to set aside their suspicions, as well as to point to another more important than him. John replied to them, saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals". There are different ideas about what he meant by that last part, the simplest being that to untie someone's sandals was the work of a slave. So, John was saying that he was even less worthy than a slave to do something for the one that was coming, pointing to the greatness of that one. It may also be the case that because John had such a large, enthusiastic following, the gospel writers may have included these statements to make sure people understood that John was subordinate to Jesus.

It is then that he describes the difference between his baptism, and that of the one to follow him. As was mentioned, John's baptism was a form of cleansing, a washing away of past sins, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Being of a rather apocalyptic mindset, John was probably thinking of a baptism of fire being essentially the fire of judgement, but from Jesus we will see something quite different. Rather than judgement his would be a baptism of empowerment.

We recognize the empowering aspect of Jesus' baptism when we see the connection between fire and the Holy Spirit. Symbolically, that is most apparent in the second chapter of the Book of Acts describing the day of Pentecost. Followed by a sound like the rush of a violent wind, it says, "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability". Of course, the ability to speak in tongues is just one gift of the Spirit. To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be empowered for ministry, each according to the gifts and talents one possesses.

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit "is understood as the divine energy of life, the creative spirit of life". (Moltmann) Keeping in mind that in the biblical languages the word for wind, breath, and spirit are the same, we see the Holy Spirit at the beginning of creation. The "wind of God" that swept over the waters, can be seen as the Spirit - the Spirit as a creative power, and in the second story of creation it is the breath of God, also interpreted as the Spirit of God, that gives life to Adam.

In the New Testament the Spirit can be seen, again, in a creative way, creating divine life in Mary's womb, and "is described as the power of the resurrection". (Moltmann). And just as it is the power of the Spirit that raises Jesus from the dead, it is the same power that creates new life in us. Through the Spirit, we can find ourselves experiencing resurrection power. As Paul writes in the eighth chapter of Romans, "But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit than dwells in you".

In the same chapter Paul points to the difference between those who walk according to the flesh versus those who walk according to the Spirit. Walking according to the flesh can be described as life grounded in selfishness, hardness of heart, legalism, as well as having an inflated sense of self, closed in on ourselves, with little concern for others. To walk according to the Spirit is to live for others, to be open to love and open to God. (Boff) As Paul says in Romans 5:5, "...God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us".

Returning to the imagery of the Holy Spirit and fire, a sixteenth century Carmelite friar known as John of the Cross, wrote a poem called, "The Living Flame of Love". Its opening stanza reads, "O living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest center/ Since now you are not oppressive, now consummate! if it be your will: tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!" That which he refers to as the living flame of love is the Holy Spirit., and his poem speaks of the fact that our deepest experience of God comes through our relationship with the Spirit, a relationship that can be empowering and transformative for both individuals and a people gathered in the name of God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. As one commentator on the poem writes, "This flame of love is the Spirit of its Bridegroom, who is the Holy Spirit. The soul feels him within itself not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it but as a fire that burns and flares within it...and that flame, every time it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the quality of divine life". That is a beautiful expression of the life altering power of an intimate relationship with the Spirit. A vital and thriving church is a church alive in the living flame of love, i.e., a church that dwells in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray: God of love and mercy, we are made glad by the good news of your love for us and for all. We are grateful for your creative power that makes life possible and all that is necessary for sustaining life. We thank you for the gift of your Word made flesh, by which our lives are measured, found wanting, and renewed. And we rejoice in the presence of your Holy Spirit that kindles within us a passion for life and empowers us for service to you. May we come to know the Spirit as a Living Flame of Love that truly burns within our hearts and leads us to spread your transformative love in a world yearning for hope and for peace. We also pray for your transformative and healing power in those with special needs.....Amen.