

“WATER AND THE SPIRIT!”
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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I don't know about you, but when I thought about 2010 and making new year's resolutions, I became a little anxious, to say the least. There are things I need to do and ought to do; goals I would like to attain, things I would like to see happen in the life of the church and in my own life; but the future looks uncertain at best. It appears that the economy is picking up, but ever so slowly, and I wonder, as do all of us, I suppose, will we ever catch up to where we were before the recession started, let alone move ahead toward our long-term financial goals?

Of course, it's all a matter of perspective. I was at a gathering over the holidays where a man about my age shared with me in confidence that he had just lost his job. He was trying to cope with what that would mean, not only for his family's well-being, but for his own self-esteem. On Christmas Eve I talked with a young woman who was in tears. "My brother is in Afghanistan," she shared. "I'm so scared."

What does the future look like? Where are we headed with the economic situation, world affairs, family situations, and personal problems? Some of the issues we face make traditional new year's goals such as losing ten pounds or getting more exercise look pretty tame.

For the church, it is traditional on the first Sunday after Epiphany to focus our thoughts on the Baptism of Jesus and the meaning of baptism for our lives today. Maybe the framers of the Lectionary sensed that we need to take a look at who we are as baptized people as we begin a new year. Maybe the church leaders knew that with the pressures and challenges of everyday life we might need to be reminded of our vows. And so we read today about the baptism of our Lord and reflect upon what it means to be baptized.

First of all, we note that while most of us were baptized as babies, and had nothing to say about it, Jesus was baptized as an adult. Jesus made a conscious and deliberate decision to be baptized by John. Of course, just two weeks ago we celebrated his birth, after four weeks of intense preparation known as Advent. Someone says, "He sure grew up fast!" Babies do. The organist at my first church was a woman with seven children. When our son, Tim, was born, she said, "Enjoy every day. They don't stay children very long." I listened carefully and never forgot what she said. I figured a woman with seven children knew what she was talking about. And I found that it is true. Babies grow up in no time at all.

Be that as it may, we know very little about the childhood and adolescent years of Jesus, so the Lectionary designers felt free to move right to the pivotal decision of Jesus to choose to be baptized by John and to accept the call that God placed upon his life. In like manner, whether you were baptized as a baby, as a child or as an adult, every person who has been baptized is called by God for a mission, a task, a special responsibility in this world. You have heard me

say before, and you will hear me say again: not one of us is on this earth by accident. We are not here by chance, but by the fixed design and purpose of Almighty God.

It is said that every morning when he got up, Martin Luther would go to the mirror and put his hand on his head and say, "*I am baptized.*" In this way, he reminded himself that he had been created, formed and called by God for a specific purpose. Maybe every morning seems excessive, but what would happen if you and I were to consciously recall our baptism more often than we do? This morning is one such opportunity. Do you remember the vows that you took or that your parents took on that day when you were baptized? If you were baptized as a baby, as I was, then you had to learn what it meant to have had those drops of water placed on your head. Your parents agreed to raise you in the Christian way of life. As an adolescent, you accepted and confirmed their intentions at Confirmation.

As an adult you and I have to agree each and every day to follow the Christian way of life, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. I firmly believe that each of us needs to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and pledge our allegiance to his kingdom, as the baptism and membership vows state. We need to do this, making a conscious decision to follow Jesus, rather than the ways of the world. But most of us need to make this decision, not just once, but every time we are confronted with choices in our lives. "What would Jesus do?" should be not only words on a bracelet we wear on our arms or a bumper sticker we put on our cars, but a real life question we ask ourselves every time we are confronted with issues that affect the well-being of ourselves and other people.

What would Jesus do? That's a challenge in our dog-eat-dog world where nice guys often finish last and the best defense is a good offense. How do we cope not only with what life sends our way, but with the decision to take the high road in situations that confront us every day?

It is worthy of note that in all three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the baptism of Jesus immediately precedes his wilderness experience and temptation. In order for Jesus to withstand the temptations that came to him, he had to have a clear picture of who he was and the mission to which God was calling him. And so do we! Most of us spend most of our lives in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, between a self-centered and self-consumed life without Christ and the kingdom of God in all its fullness. But know that as we wander through the wilderness, we are not alone. It is almost as if Isaiah heard us talking and reminds us that God created us, formed us and redeemed us. Isaiah tells us, "*Do not fear,*" says the Lord, "*for 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 the fire you shall not be burned, and the flames shall not consume you.*"

The symbol for baptism is water, of course, pure, life-giving water. I always remind parents when they make plans to have their children baptized that we can live for quite a while without food, but not very long without water. Before we are born, we are nourished and fed in the water of a womb. We use water for cleansing. We all know how good it feels to take a shower after a long, hot day.

But water can also be life-threatening. I recall like it was yesterday the time my young son and I were caught in a riptide in the ocean and feared that we would not make it back to shore. Flood water does horrendous damage, and there are reports of drownings all the time. I walked the streets of New Orleans with a team of people from this church following Hurricanes

Rita and Katrina, where the damage from the floods was overwhelming. We were there to help following those horrific storms. Our work crews from Church of the Saviour spent many hours working to restore homes and church facilities in New Orleans — but what we did was just a drop in the bucket compared with the devastation of the water.

Isaiah reminds us that when we go through tough times, we do not go through them alone. *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.”* All of us know what it means to be in deep water. Sometimes we refer to it as being “in over our heads.” We’ve all been there. Some of us may be there now! But know this: when we are in deep water, Jesus stands in that water with us. He does not call us to follow somewhere he has not been, nor send us someplace he is unwilling to go. He stands in the water with us. No matter what our assignment, we are not alone. God is there. God is with us, every step of the way.

As important as water is to our lives, baptism is not just about water. It also involves the Spirit of God, which is most often symbolized by fire. The reason we have candles burning on the altar is to remind us of that the Spirit of God in this place and in every place. Fire brings warmth into our lives. Fire cooks our food, warms our homes, purifies metal to make it strong for our buildings and cars and bridges. Of course, fire, like water, can cause destruction and devastation. Ask any firefighter. Ask any insurance adjustor. But Isaiah assures us that when we walk through the fire of criticism or abuse or injustice — the flames of evil will not consume us. For God will be with us — even in the fire, and God will see us through.

God’s spirit is not tame or benign. That’s why the symbol is fire! These images of fire and water should cause us to have a healthy respect of God. Sometimes I read syrupy slogans on the Internet or see books and magazine articles that make God seem so chummy that it sounds as if the author has just had lunch with him! In like manner, sometimes people approach Baptism as if it was just a nice little ceremony that will make grandma happy. Baptism is serious business! The God of the Bible is a God of water and fire. His Spirit cannot be tamed and domesticated for my purposes. His calling rarely fits comfortably with my goals and aspirations. He is always nudging me out of my comfort zone, calling me to larger responsibilities and more challenging tasks.

I remind you of the words of John the Baptist when he said, *“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.”* I repeat, God never calls us to be comfortable, but to stretch ourselves, risk ourselves for him. A good question to ask as we begin this new year is this: What am I being called to do in this new year that is so risky, so outrageous, so unrealistic that I will be able to accomplish it only with God’s help?

Amidst all the problems and challenges that all of us face in this new year, we are called to take on **even more** as baptized Christians, people who are created, formed, redeemed by God for a specific mission and purpose in the world. We are called not just to live and let live, but to live and help live. We are called to follow the one who risked his life, and who ultimately gave his life for others.

The scary news is that this is quite a challenge. The good news is that we are not alone. God is with us. When we pass through the water, God will be with us. When we walk through the fire, we will not be burned.

Yes, we are baptized, designated for a mission and a purpose. We are marked with water

and the Spirit for service, called to be God's people in the world today. Let us feel the water on our foreheads and the flame of passion in our hearts as we remember our baptism, our identity, and our calling. May the water and Spirit of God guide us in all that we do.

Prayer: Dear God, as we hear the story of Jesus' baptism and how Jesus accepted your call upon his life, we realize that your call came not just to Jesus, but comes to us today. May we respond as Jesus did, and fulfill your mission and purpose for our lives. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.