

09 January 2022-The 1st Sunday after The Epiphany: Luke 3:16

...he who is mightier than I is coming...he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire.

There are two familiar and comfortable elements in Baptism: water and Spirit. In Luke's Gospel, there is a third element: Fire. There are few things more incongruous than water and fire. What does this image of mean?

To understand, here is a brief tour of a typical marketplace in Jesus' day. There would be a variety of shops and vendors: food, clothing, tools, decorations, jewelry, and so on. Even in small towns there would be a silversmith. Since the shops were open air, anyone could observe the silversmithing process. First the silversmith separates the ore and purifies it. This is done in a crucible, an iron cup over a blazing hot fire. The worthless parts agitate to the surface and are skimmed off. The purification is complete when the surface is liquidly smooth and still. Bending over the crucible, the worker sees his face reflected in the pure silver, as in a mirror. From the Prophet Zechariah: (Thus says the Lord,) *"I will put them into the fire and refine them as one refines silver. I will say, 'They are my people', and they will say, 'The Lord is my God'."* (13:9).

In Baptism, our incorporation into Christ, we are not simply given something—salvation, eternal life, grace, blessing. To be in Christ is to be purged of that which corrupts the reflection of God in our lives. The Baptism of water, Holy Spirit and fire is the beginning of purification and eternal making new with which we are to be intimately involved. This is simple to do and is the essence of prayer and worship: "Purify me"; "Relieve me from the bondage of self"; "Take away my self-willed difficulties;" "not my will but your will be done in me today."

What is base and useless must be surrendered, released to bubble up and be removed. During such purification, we will be agitated, because the old will want to remain. We can be tempted to stay as we are. Therefore, surrender must be accompanied by trust in God's eternal mercy because God values us so highly. Agitation is real, but momentary, not our true selves God intends. We will come to recognize our double mindedness, our narcissism and self-promotion, our shame, guilt, fear, and resentment. What is base MUST be agitated, come to surface, and be skimmed, so we are released from the bondage of self, so we may better do God's will, may better serve God and others. We yearn for purification so that others may clearly see Christ reflected in us. We base our lives not on our own strength but on God's loving-kind mercy, on God's purifying fire in our lives.

Never give up; keep on practicing self-awareness, repentance, amendment. God transforms our worst into grace for salvation. It is not our sins, our failings that keep us from God. It is only our unwillingness to be transformed, our complacency with the way we are right now.

Just as the silversmith will make an object from the silver, and the object and the silver become one, so it is when the Holy Spirit purifies us. When we see a silver chalice, we don't say, "Pretty silver." We say, "What a beautiful chalice." The cup has no existence without the silver, but the silver has no form without the cup. So is XP to us. Just as silver and chalice are one object, to be transformed into Christ by the Holy Spirit, is to become inseparably part of Christ. In Christ, we do not simply receive grace and blessing, we become grace and blessing. In Christ we become Christ's grace for others. Therefore, faith is always revealed through action, prayer is always tested through relationships, worship always begets service.

Our progress into Christ is known through the agitation of our vanities, and the reflection of Christ in our lives. In the Church we know both: the agitation of people's messy lives, and the reflection of Christ in people's messy lives. Here is the perennial sin of the Church: the notion that the Church exists for our comfort, that the Church should make no serious demands of us, that love, mercy, and forgiveness are optional. What God intends is a people willing to go through fire, to be transformed into holiness, God crafting a holy people in, through and for Jesus Christ, purified into a pure reflection of Christ's presence and love.

God, turn up the flame of your Holy Spirit so that in us Jesus Christ is reflected, as in a pure, spotless mirror.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and forever. Amen.