

## “Baptism of Holy Spirit...and fire”

Scripture: Luke 3:7-22

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One of the fascinating toys of childhood (at least my childhood) is a kaleidoscope. You look through the tube and see the patterns and colors of the crystals at the end of the tube. Then you turn the tube and there is a new combination and pattern of the same elements—beautiful and thrilling all from the same tube. Each year in January, on this Sunday called “The Baptism of the Lord,” we look at the baptism of Jesus. We look at it as if were a kaleidoscope—we take the tube and look through it for a new pattern and combination, but it is the same tube. So, let’s review what we have—the kaleidoscope tube as it were...just the basic facts. Jesus had a cousin named John who has come to be called John the Baptist. No, he was not the first Southern Baptist! John was a dedicated Jewish teacher who began using baptism with water as a marker of commitment and solidarity...a marker of a commitment sort of like those silicone wristbands that have become popular for particular causes. The first, I think, were Livestrong—the yellow ones promoted by Lance Armstrong and Nike in support cancer research. Now there are Livefree—orange ones particularly for teenager committing to live free of smoking; the pinks ones are for cancer research; the red ones are for AIDS awareness and research; and so on.

John the Baptist did not have wristbands...but he did have water. He used lots of water. Water was the marker of commitment to the cause, and so he got the name, John the Baptist. John’s cause was faithful, generous, and ethical living...that’s the cause.

And then we have Jesus, the one who already lived faithfully, generously, and ethically. In Luke’s telling of the baptism of Jesus, you will note that there is little emphasis on John actually doing the baptism of Jesus. In fact, you will note a very odd way of telling of Jesus’ baptism. Luke will tell us about John’s ministry that included baptism; then Luke will tell us of John’s arrest which will lead to his death, and then Luke will go flashback to the baptism ministry without mentioning John’s name and say Jesus was also baptized. The focus moves away from John to Jesus.

So, put your eye to the kaleidoscope, listen and see what Luke has to say about the baptism of the Lord:

<sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by 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. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

<sup>17</sup> *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*”

<sup>18</sup> *So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.* <sup>19</sup> *But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done,* <sup>20</sup> *added to them all by shutting up John in prison.*

[All seems complete...then we have this additional word going back to before the arrest] <sup>21</sup> *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,* <sup>22</sup> *and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

Here’s the kaleidoscope pattern I would like for you to see today in the baptism of the Lord. John declares that the he baptizes with water but the one who follows him, this Jesus, will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire. And the focus is on this Jesus, who brings a baptism of Holy Spirit and fire...or Holy Wind and fire—remember that “wind” and “spirit” are the same word.

The writer of this Gospel, the Gospel of Luke, has a companion volume, the book of Acts. This Gospel of Luke recounts the events or acts of Jesus; the book of Acts recounts some of the major events or “acts” of the followers of Jesus. The pivot point moving from the acts of Jesus to the acts of his followers is the story we read at Pentecost, that church observance fifty days after Easter. Pentecost is when the followers of Jesus experience the Spirit as a mighty wind and tongues of fire. At Pentecost there is baptism of wind and flame...of Holy Spirit and fire.

Now at this point as you look at the patterns in the kaleidoscope, you may be thinking, “That great for them...those followers of Jesus got their baptism of wind and fire. All is well; now I can go back to sleep.” There is just one little thing—those who look through this kaleidoscope for any amount of time get pulled into the story...into the baptism of wind and flame...of Holy Spirit and fire.

Baptism of wind... wind is a funny sort of image for God’s movement with us. Some of you may remember a childhood book with the poem by Christiana Rossetti: “Who Has Seen the Wind?”

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I nor you:  
But when the leaves hang trembling  
The wind is passing thro’

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I:  
But when the trees bow down their heads  
The wind is passing by.

Wind is real but elusive. Wind is felt but cannot be contained. Wind is opportunity but not in our control. In some ways it is like the movie now several years old: *Evan Almighty*. It is a Hollywood spin on the story of Noah and the Ark...worth seeing as another set of eyes on this Biblical story. Evan, a recently elected Congressman, is the Noah-character. God asks him to build an ark. Building an ark is not a culturally acceptable thing today. It is not a rational thing for congressman to

do. It will not win you many votes. It requires putting your whole self in because people will laugh, poke fun, and not take you seriously. In the movie, the African-American actor Morgan Freeman gets to play the role of God (as George Burns did decades ago in the series of movies called, *O God*).

In perhaps one of the best theological moments of the movie, this God-figure has a conversation with Evan who is skeptical about stepping out on faith, about building this ark. Evan wants courage to do what God is asking. So God asks Evan—do I make you courageous, or do I provide you with opportunities to be courageous? Quite a question. Does God make us what we ought to be...we are just little robots? Or is it that God enables us and provides us with the opportunities to be our best selves?

There's that real but elusive nudge in our lives.

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I nor you:  
But when the leaves hang trembling  
The wind is passing thro'

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I:  
But when the trees bow down their heads  
The wind is passing by.

A baptism of wind is not matter of control but rather about our openness to the occasions before us to sense the nudge of God's Spirit, God's wind.

A baptism of wind...a baptism of fire. If we pick up that kaleidoscope and look too long, why we may also have baptism of fire, indeed want to be kindled, to be lit afire! Faith is "caught" more than it is taught.

Years ago, Garth Brooks, of country music fame had a song in the 1990's called, "Standing Outside the Fire" with the chorus that went,

Standing outside the fire...  
Standing outside the fire...  
Life is not tried—it is merely survived,  
If you're standing outside the fire

There's this love that is burning  
Deep in my soul,  
Constantly yearning to get out of control.  
Wanting to fly higher and higher  
I can't abide standing outside the fire.

I can't abide standing outside the fire...it is this love that will not give up. Can we be on fire in the Presbyterian Church and it not be about the color of the paint that I don't like, the kind of music I

don't like, the people that I don't like, the alternative expressions of faith that I don't like? We have those fires already burning! But the baptism of Jesus—of Holy Spirit and fire—is certainly about another kind of fire that consumes us: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

From all that I can understand about our visit from Knox Fellowships in two weeks at the Leadership Retreat and here in worship, we will be addressing that fire. And there is a decision here to be made...whether to be lit on not. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said something to the effect that success in faith is not the result of spontaneous combustion, of accidental ignition. No, you have got to set your self on fire for it...or at least get close enough to feel the warmth. And yet how often we stand outside the fire and wonder why we are not “on fire!”

On this Sunday, early in the new year, we look through the kaleidoscope of the baptism of Jesus, the baptism that Jesus experienced...the baptism that Jesus brings of Holy Wind and fire. Here is what I know—there is blowing in your life and mine which we cannot see but we can feel it. There is wind that nudges us toward the opportunities, those opportunities defined in Micah 6: to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. There is a wind that is nudging new elders and deacons in the service in this congregation. And there is a fire...a fire burning for justice, for kindness, for reconciliation, for forgiveness, for making a difference, for bearing sorrow together, to share celebrations. There's a fire that keeps drawing us closer.

As an infant, being the child of Presbyterian parents, I was brought forward in worship for baptism. There was not much water used in my baptism—just a little sprinkle. The Rev. Henry Dockery Brown, a man I never knew, held me in his arms and sprinkled some water on my head. He said, “Here is a child of God.” Now, according to my parents, the heavens did not open; no heavenly dove descended. However, I keep sensing the nudge of a holy wind and at least the smell of a fire, if not the warmth of a fire. I keep getting drawn in. My prayer for me...my prayer for you...is for a continuing baptism of wind and flame, of Holy Spirit and fire.