

Fire and Water
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NPMC – January 9, 2022

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Hymns: Voices Together 441 - Crashing Waters at Creation, 595 - When the Storms of Life are Raging, and 703 - Rain Down

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; 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 fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth-- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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." Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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."

What does baptism mean to you? If you think back to the time you were baptized or baptism services you have attended, what do you think of? Maybe making a choice to follow Jesus or being welcomed as an official, adult member of the church. Or maybe you have experience with traditions for whom baptism is more like child dedication: the promise to raise a child up in faith, knowing the love of God. The Sunday after Epiphany is traditionally "Baptism of Our Lord" Sunday, when we remember the baptism of Jesus

at the hands of his cousin, John the Baptist, in the waters of the Jordan River. Of course, baptism is a loaded word and practice for us as Anabaptist-Mennonites. At the beginning of our tradition 500 years ago, adult baptism or believer's baptism was one of the major ways in which our branch of the church set itself apart from the rest of the church, Catholic and Protestant alike. That's why the name Anabaptists – meaning “re-baptizers” – was given to them, and at first it was meant as an insult! Do-It-Yourself baptism did not go over very well at the beginning...

Historian C. Arnold Snyder talks about three types of baptism that were important to the early Anabaptists of the 16th-century Radical Reformation, and you might be surprised, like I was, to discover what an advanced/complex view of baptism they really had:

- 1. An inner baptism of the Holy Spirit.**

This inner experience of receiving the Holy Spirit – not the baptism with water itself! – was considered the most important event for believers in early Anabaptism, transforming them spiritually and empowering them become faithful disciples, following in Jesus' footsteps.

- 2. Water baptism in the faith community.**

Water baptism was seen as a symbol of the inner, spiritual transformation. The early Anabaptists insisted that “the water is just the water,” a sign before others that one had been transformed and renewed spiritually.

- 3. Baptism of blood.**

This refers to what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, “the cost of discipleship,” the belief that faith requires something of us, that following Jesus'

way of justice and peace is not an easy walk in the park. In the 16th century, this phrase, baptism of blood, took on an added meaning: it came to refer to the “terrible reality” of martyrdom that so many early Anabaptists faced. More than 4000 early Anabaptists were killed in often brutal ways for their faith, a very high number for such a small religious group.¹

As we turn to our Scripture passages for this morning, we see all three of these types of baptism in different ways. I want to reflect on them using the themes of fire and water. Both of these themes actually have double-meanings to them in our passages for today, and elsewhere in the Bible. Both fire and water have the potential to harm or comfort, to destroy or to nurture life.

FIRE

In the wilderness, John the Baptist preaches fiery sermons about the Messiah to a people waiting desperately for liberation. As they wonder if he is the long-awaited Messiah, John declares: “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.” Here is the Spirit that will appear as tongues of flame, baptizing the heads of the disciples in the book of Acts, symbolizing the Spirit’s sacred presence with the early church. This connection between fire and the Divine would not have been strange at all to those listening to John. After all, in their history was the appearance of God to Moses in a burning bush, and as a pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the nights in the wilderness after their escape from slavery in Egypt. This is a God who

¹ C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: Exploring the Historical Center of Anabaptist Teachings and Practices* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007), 23-25.

comforts with warmth and light in the night, and who blazes into the lives of those who are open to the Holy Spirit's presence and guidance. And in a small way, we still symbolize the Divine presence with fire, as we light the Christ candle and the Peace Lamp as part of our worship services, as we wear ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross on Ash Wednesday.

"God tastes like fire," said early Anabaptist Hans Hut, and Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler echoes that, writing,

And if you rage or fear, if tears are your bread
God is there in the middle of it –
A steaming pot,
A raging she-bear
A smoking kiln
Or perhaps fire.
Always fire.²

But as much as fire comforts and sustains us, as much as we need fire for our very survival, sometimes it is fire itself that is to be feared. As we heard news about the devastating forest fires in BC this past summer, and in the north of our own province, this was not a fire in which we met God or sensed the divine presence. This was a destructive fire that threatened life. This is the kind of fire that turned into "the baptism of blood" for too many early Anabaptists, as they were cruelly sentenced to death by burning at the stake for their beliefs in a terrible baptism by fire.

And yet, we are not left without comfort, even at moments such as these. It is precisely during moments of passing through fire that the prophet Isaiah's powerful words of comfort come to us:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers,

² Melissa Florer-Bixler, *Fire By Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 11.

they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (Isaiah 43:1-2).

One of Isaiah's images for suffering here is "walking through fire." Notice that God does not promise the avoidance of suffering. God does not promise that one will NOT have to walk through the fire. Rather, God promises to be present WHEN we walk through the fire. And God's presence there makes all the difference: the fire will not burn us, the flame will not consume us, because God is there. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel, we walk through the flames but are spared their harm.

WATER

The one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire receives baptism at the hands of the one who prophesied his coming. Just like the other people, Jesus goes with John into the Jordan River. Up to their waists in the gentle current, John cups water in his hands and pours it over Jesus' head, speaking words of blessing and renewal. This was a variation on existing Jewish rituals of washing related to worship (the *mikvah*), used "to celebrate moments of joy, to heal after times of sorrow or illness, or to commemorate [life] transitions and changes."³ And here, we meet God in the water. The God who moved over the waters of the deep at creation is also the one who brought water from a rock to feed the thirsty Israelites in the desert. Jesus will go on to wash the feet of his disciples and to offer the Samaritan woman at the well living water, promising that those who drink it will never be thirsty again (John 4). We know that we need water to live – that all of us are born in the waters of birth, making baptism with

³ See <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/conversion//using-mikvah-jewish-ritual-bath>

water a type of re-birth, a cleansing renewal, a fresh start.⁴ And while he is still in the baptismal waters, Jesus is claimed by God as God's beloved child, and the Spirit descends gracefully as a dove: a symbol of love and peace. This is the birth of Jesus' ministry in Luke's Gospel, which begins in being claimed as God's own.

But like fire, water also has its fearsome side: while the Israelites pass through the Red Sea on dry land, the Egyptians pursuing them drown; without the ark, Noah and the animals too would have been lost in the terrible flood. Hurricanes and tsunamis are not comforting or cleansing, but leave destruction in their wake. The early Anabaptist martyrs who were killed by drowning received a very terrible and violent kind of "re-baptism." Even speaking of Covid "waves" as we have been doing points to tumultuous waters as a threat: we are now in the fifth "wave" of illness washing over us, threatening our health and that of our friends and neighbours, especially the most vulnerable.

But Isaiah's voice again comes to us with words of reassurance from God:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; 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.

Again, there is no going around the waters: God speaks of "when you pass through" them, not if. And yet, because of God's constant presence, the rivers will not "overwhelm" us, and the waves will not overcome us, because God will never leave us. Like Jesus at the moment of his baptism, we are claimed as God's beloved even in the midst of the waves; God has called us by name and we are God's own children.

As I reflected on the baptisms of the early Anabaptists this week, I was both saddened and inspired (which is always how I feel about them!). The fear and violence

⁴ This connection is made in: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/waters-baptism-remember>

they suffered as so many were martyred for their faith is deeply tragic. And yet even in the midst of these terrible experiences of fear and pain, there are stories of those who sang or prayed as they faced martyrdom. Winnipeg poet Sarah Klassen has written a poem called, “Singing at the Fire,” in which she tells the story of seven unnamed early Anabaptist martyrs who, remarkably, sang to the end:

Singing [at the fire]..., the breath
lifting a melody, the stubborn tongue
... shaping the smoke-
blackened words.⁵

In other words, they lived Isaiah’s words of comfort in the very worst of circumstances, refusing to give up seeking – perhaps even glimpsing – God’s presence, even in the midst of the fire and water.

While our circumstances are thankfully different (500 years is a long time!), we too live in a time when there are legitimate threats burning around us, when fear understandably washes over us like waves. Yet Isaiah’s promise and the songs of the martyrs are in our spiritual DNA. May we draw strength and courage from those who have passed through fire and water before us, knowing that God goes with us even there, for we are God’s beloved children, whom God has called by name.

I’ll close with a prayer from Illustrated Ministry:
“God of presence and strength, Help us feel you here with us when we are anxious and afraid, when the future feels unwieldy and uncertain. We know nothing is unknown to you, O God, and we know you are our rock and our comfort in times of trouble. Give us wisdom and courage to make changes that will help things get better. Amen.”⁶

⁵ From: *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror*, ed. Kirsten Eve Beachy (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2010), 92.

⁶ https://illustratedmin.s3.amazonaws.com/freebies/WhenYouFeelAnxious.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Pulrn_U6NMr72MkXbt59W0I1Twbp5iAbPOkLs0wo_n6wMg5b_rSyp9N8

GOD
OF

PRESENCE & **Strength**

Help us feel you
here with us...

...when we are
anxious and afraid

WHEN THE **future** Feels

UNWIELDLY

AND

UNCERTAIN

we know **nothing** is **unknown** TO YOU

GOD

we know YOU ARE OUR **ROCK**

AND OUR **COMFORT** IN TIMES OF

TROUBLE.

Give us **WISDOM** and **COURAGE**...

...to make **CHANGES** that will help...

THINGS
GET
BETTER.

Amen.

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