

"The Beloved"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us like the waters of baptism, cleansing us and opening us to the wisdom of your Word. In the name of your beloved son Jesus, we pray. Amen.**

Today is about the baptism of Jesus, the Beloved Son of God; the inaugural event of Jesus' ministry. It's a perfect day to actually baptise some babies and young children, and we've baptised folks on this day in past years, before Covid. With our continuing Covid isolation, we can't have the congregation in the Sanctuary, and can't baptise anyone. We have several babies who are becoming toddlers waiting for a time that we can gather around our baptismal font and celebrate baptism as a congregation, for baptism is a public event that *must* be celebrated as a congregation.

I read about a wonderful account of baptism from a young western girl. Out on the cattle ranches of the west, the unbranded calves that roam at large are known as "mavericks." They can be claimed by anyone who is able to brand them. The young girl had been baptised recently and her schoolmates questioned her about the meaning of the ceremony. "Well," she said, "I was a little maverick out on the prairie and the minister put the Christian mark of the cross on my forehead. I was branded so that when God sees me, God will know that I am one of God's children." It's an interesting thought to be permanently branded as one of God's own in baptism.

At the time of John the Baptist, it was a brave act of faith to be publicly pronounced "baptised" and to suffer the persecution experienced by early Christians. At the time, the people thought that John the Baptist might be their long-awaited Messiah, but he clearly subordinates himself to the One who will come after him. John is not even worthy to untie the thong of this One's sandals; untying sandals was such a menial task that it was expected only of slaves. John says that the One to come will baptise, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and

fire. Wow! Does John mean that the repentant will receive the Holy Spirit and the unrepentant experience the judgement of fire? Or is John referring to the unquenchable fire that burns the chaff after the wind of the Holy Spirit separates it from the grain, thus separating good from evil? Or is it the holy purification of a refiner's fire? Or is it the tongues of fire at Pentecost: the fiery feeling inside caused by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Hmmm – baptised with the Holy Spirit and fire; it could have multiple meanings, and none are simple, or simply symbolic.

People sometimes jokingly say that the role of a minister is "to hatch, match and dispatch;" to baptise, marry and bury members of the flock. As a minister, it's important to get the right ceremony at the right time! South East Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky is a congregation of about 15,000 members. It's so huge they have a very specialized staff. For example, they have a staff member in charge of something they call the "Wedding Department." One Sunday, a staff member from the Wedding Department was asked to baptise a person. Something must have unsettled him, maybe it was the size of the congregation, or the pressure of the moment. Whatever it was, that morning, in front of the entire congregation he baptised the person in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and then declared: "I now pronounce you" And then he stopped, realizing what he'd said. Then he smiled and continued: "I now pronounce you ... baptised!" I suppose it's better than pronouncing "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust!"

Have you ever wondered why Jesus would want to be baptized by John the Baptist? At this time in Jewish history, water baptism served one of three main purposes. First, there was the "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" that was preached by John the Baptist. But Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and he doesn't need a baptism of repentance. He's the One who baptises with the Holy Spirit and fire!

The second kind of baptism was for people who wanted to convert to Judaism; a baptism of conversion. If you were a gentile who wanted to convert to Judaism, you were publicly admitted to the Jewish faith and baptised in water. At

the time, Jewish people also immersed items purchased from the gentiles in water to cleanse them. The Jewish people were accustomed to the idea of baptism being associated with cleansing. But Jesus was born Jewish and didn't need a baptism of conversion or of cleansing.

Third, in the Jewish faith, priests were baptised. The Law dictated that especially the High Priest was to be "washed with water." In Leviticus, we're told that God commanded Moses to bring "Aaron and his sons forward and [Moses] washed them with water." Later in the ceremony, Moses "poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him, to consecrate him." This cleansing and anointing ceremony initiated Aaron's priesthood; his authorization as God's representative.

In our gospel reading today, Luke tells us about Jesus' baptism and then tells us: "Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his work." The ministry of Jesus, our High Priest, *began* with his baptism by John the Baptist. After his baptism, God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit. Jesus prays and "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.'" The opening of heaven brings God's blessing, with the anointing of the Holy Spirit that descends from heaven in bodily form like a dove. It was not a dove, but like a dove. Luke tries to describe something very real; something that comes "in bodily form," but it's also elusive and undefinable; it's something "like a dove."

Fred Markes describes in a sermon, a conversation he had with a retired missionary who visited the church where he served. The retired missionary had served faithfully in Africa and one day, she visited a small baptismal service. A fellow missionary took three adult baptismal candidates to the center of a shallow river, and dug a hole in the sand so there would be enough water for the baptism. Even then, the new believers were forced to sit in the sand so there would be enough water to cover them for the important ceremony.

The visiting missionary saw what she expected: friends and family members gathered to watch, and the presiding missionary in the river repeating familiar

scriptures before baptising the candidates. When the first candidate came up out of the water, he began to shout with joy and excitement. The quiet service was quiet no more! The second candidate did the same thing. And the final candidate also came up from the shallow water shouting for joy.

Afterwards, the visiting missionary asked about the unusual tradition, "Why all the shouting?" The presiding missionary responded, "I haven't been able to completely communicate in their language. They heard the scripture I gave them, but they didn't understand the symbolic nature of it. When I told them that they would be 'buried with him by baptism into death ... and raised to walk in newness of life' from Romans 6:4, they thought baptism would actually kill them!" Fred said that they chuckled as they heard the visiting missionary's story, until she froze them with her gaze. "Let me ask you a question," she said, "If you thought baptism would kill you, would you be willing to get in the river?"

Early followers of Christ risked their lives when they identified with the growing group of persecuted Christians. When they were baptised, torture and death – even death upon a cross, was a very real possibility. Today, the love that underlies Christianity is better known and accepted, but we still put our lives in God's total care and keeping through baptism, regardless of the difficulties we may face.

I'd like to close with a prayer from the recently released film *Don't Look Up*. The film is a political satire of the U.S. reaction to the discovery by two astronomers of an approaching comet that will kill everyone on earth. Just before the comet hits earth, the astronomers, together with family and friends, gather around the dinner table and during dinner they hold hands and a young man prays this prayer. I think it's the only part of the film that's not a satire. Let's pray: Dearest Father and almighty Creator, we ask for your grace [today], despite our pride; your forgiveness, despite our doubt. Most of all, Lord, we ask for your love, to sooth us through these dark times. May we face whatever is to come, in your divine will, with courage and open hearts of acceptance. Amen.

They prayed this prayer shortly before everything is destroyed and I found it very moving. Thanks be to God. Amen.