

Baptism By Fire

By: Penny Holste

January 10, 2016. What are our hopes for the future? In Jesus' day people were depending on a messiah for a better future, and John the Baptist told them that a messiah would come, baptizing not with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. But we don't usually associate Jesus with fire. Pastor Penny asks us to consider today thinking of Jesus as a judge. After all, Jesus has high expectations for us.

*** Transcript ***

We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A retired man liked to go to nursing homes and hospitals to do volunteer work. He went to a local hospital, and went from room to room telling what he thought were funny jokes and singing some songs, and he always had the habit, when he left a patient's room, of saying, "I hope you get better." And as he left one man's room he said, "Yeah, I hope you get better too." What are our hopes for the future? Will we get better? Or maybe I'm asking what do we depend on to assure us that the year ahead will be as good or better than the year behind us? If we're thinking about our work or our school, maybe we're depending on our hard work, our accomplishments in the past. If we're thinking about our social success, we might be depending on our own social graces, our ability to talk to anyone, our wit, or our even nature. If we're thinking about our financial future, maybe we're depending on our advisors, our retirement, our investments. If we're depending on our health in the future, maybe we're depending on our doctors, or on medical science to find a drug that maybe works better for our condition than the one we have.

In Jesus' day people were depending on a messiah for a better future. They were hoping that God would send somebody that would get them out of the mess that Israel was in. They were an occupied country. They were always in jeopardy of being crushed by Rome, and finally they were. So through the hundreds of years that they had waited for a messiah, they were really waiting in Jesus' day. And when John the Baptist came on the scene, he was very charismatic. He had these fiery sermons. He invited the people to come for baptism, which wasn't our baptism, like an initiation. It was a baptism of renewal, of their commitment to God. When he invited them to come forward, they came in droves, hoping that maybe this man was the messiah. But John told them no, you need to hope for someone else. There is someone you can hope for. He's coming after me. He's stronger than I am. And he baptizes not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Now we know of course he was referring to Jesus, and that kind of works with what we understand of Jesus. Especially the Holy Spirit part. We know that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. We know the Holy Spirit was part of his coming into the world, as the angel told Mary it would be. But what about fire? We don't usually associate Jesus with fire. Fire is a fierce, frightening force in the world. We talk about a "baptism by fire." And that expression began as a reference to a soldier's first battle. That was his baptism by fire. Now, we have used that expression to mean any time that we try to undergo something for the first time, and just find it quite overwhelming. We may learn a lot, but it's very difficult. It's our baptism by fire. Fire doesn't seem to go with Jesus. And then John the Baptist has another image of Jesus. It is the farmer standing with a winnowing fork. And that's kind of a scary picture as John describes it, because a winnowing fork was what a farmer used to separate the life-filled seed of the grain from the chaff that was empty. But what John is suggesting is that this person to come is both a judge and one who punishes. Do we think of Jesus as a judge? And as one who punishes?

I think we can all think of times when Jesus judged people. He judged the Jewish rulers a lot because they were often hypocritical. He called them: you whited sepulchers, you whitewashed tombs. You look so good on the outside, and inside you're full of selfishness and evil. He turned the tables over in the temple, because the money changers were abusing the purpose of the temple. He did judge -- but he never punished. In fact, the only punishment in Jesus' life was the punishment he took upon himself when he was dying on the cross. And that was punishment, that was the result not of his evil, but of the evil of others. He died that horrible death partly because of the cruelty of the Roman Empire that used that form of execution. He was hanging there because of the cowardice of Pontius Pilate, who couldn't stand up to the Jewish leaders. He was there at the fault and in judgment of those Jewish leaders who, because of their blindness and because of their intense selfishness, wanted Jesus dead. And he was there in some mysterious, miraculous way, as a result of our selfishness, of the walls of selfishness that we build around ourselves. He was there on the cross to smash that wall down, so that God could come into our lives.

So this was the picture that John the Baptist gave of the one to come. And of course Jesus did come. But when he first arrived on the scene with John the Baptist, it looked like he was just an ordinary person. He was lined up with the rest of them to be baptized. But when he was baptized something extraordinary happened. While he was still praying, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit came down -- we're told in bodily form, like a dove -- on him. And he heard a voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved. In you I am well pleased." The Father was well pleased with Jesus, even though Jesus hadn't even started his ministry yet. The Father was pleased with Jesus not for what he had done, but for the relationship they had. Because Jesus was his son, because they were flesh-and-blood together, because Jesus was a part of the Father. And the Father had great expectations for Jesus.

Well, the gospel writer tells us all about Jesus' baptism -- not just because we need to know the story of Jesus, which is important -- but because Jesus' baptism has something to do with our lives. Because the same words that the Father spoke to Jesus at his baptism are what this ritual, this rite, this sacrament conveys to us in our baptisms. In our baptisms God is saying, "You are my son. You are my daughter. I love you, and I'm really pleased with you." Pleased with us, not of course because we could have done anything. Most of us were baptized as infants, as we talked about with the children. Pleased because of the relationship that God has established with us, because we are God's children, because we are in a sense flesh and blood with God. We are a part of God. And God has high expectations for us.

You know, we might not know when we were baptized. We might not remember it or even know the date, but what's important is that we know that our baptisms have something to do with life everyday. I was talking to a woman who was reflecting on her life, an older woman, an African-American woman, and I knew that she had worked as a sales clerk in a big department store for many years. But what I didn't know was how she got into that job. She originally came applying to be an elevator operator, only to be told that black people could not do that. So she was offered the job of being a matron, which is someone who cleans up the dressing rooms. But because of her hard work and her skill, she was soon the head matron. And then I don't know how many years it was, but she finally was allowed to be a sales clerk. Now, she told me this without any sense of bitterness, even though she knew how unfair and how racist this whole situation had been. Even though she's felt that, I'm sure many times in her life, I sensed no bitterness. She did not let what others thought of her tell her who she was. She did not let other people's ideas, or white culture's ideas, tell her who she was. She knows her identity. She is a child of God. She is valued. She is precious. She is loved. And that has gotten her through day after day of mourning and of illness.

Jesus has high expectations for us. And we know that there are people around us who are not looking forward to the new year with much hope. Maybe it's because they don't know who they are. Maybe it's because they take their identities from what people tell them they are. Maybe they are still dealing with voices from their past that haunt them and continue to form them. Maybe they base their identities on whether they succeed or fail. Jesus asks us to carry out his mission, to reach out to these people who are our friends, our relatives, our coworkers, our teammates, and show them by our life -- by how we treat them -- that they too are valuable. They are precious. They too are sons and daughters of God. And when Jesus asks us to do that, how can we say no? After all, we are God's children. It's our identity to carry on Jesus' mission. It is who we are.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2016, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Penny Holste, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22