

Sermon Resource for Justice & Advocacy Sunday
January 19, 2014

In the description of Jesus' baptism, John and Mark make a point to say that John the Baptist proclaimed that the baptism of Jesus' was different than his own saying " I came baptizing with water...but one who is more powerful than I will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' In today's gospel this is the only time John is mentioned, although he is introduced as one who was influential, with a following and reputation just preceding this proclamation. Religious leaders go to the desert to investigate the phenomenon of John, challenging his authority to baptize and asking if he is Elijah or the Messiah. He makes it clear that all his power and influence is there to serve one purpose, and one purpose only... to witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God. The first image of Jesus in John's Gospel is that of light and darkness, the second is one of sacrificial slaughter, blood and death.

In Mark, Jesus' baptism immediately drives him into the wilderness to confront the power of Satan. Luke and Matthew expand John's witness about Jesus' baptism, saying " I baptize you with water but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire," and that Jesus' baptism ushers in division and judgment.

The Gospel writers let us know that Baptism is never benign, it launches a confrontation with this world that both burns and divides before it brings healing and new life.

Below is a sermon by Rev. Phil Lawson, UMC who expands on this understanding of baptism and witness in a sermon delivered at Miracles of Faith Lutheran, on August, 2013, just before the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington:

After Jesus had completed his public ministry of caring for the sick, the blind and the hungry he then sets his face toward Jerusalem saying "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Luke 12:49-51

On top of the gospel lesson I want to read 3 more verses of scripture from the letter to the Hebrews:

³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. ¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 11:39 - 12:2

In the Gospel passage, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, his public ministry of caring for the sick, the blind and the hungry is just about over. He is on his way to Jerusalem. In the 9th chapter it says he set his face toward J. He was determined to go to Jerusalem.

Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (Including Jesus). let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. "Therefore" is an important word there because you have to pay attention to what comes before it. In the 11th chapter of Hebrews they call the roll of the saints. By faith Moses, by faith Sarah etc. then in the 29th verse it says all these died in faith not

having seen the promise, because God has prepared something special that apart from us they would not have received the promise.

In looking to Jesus we have to look at these very difficult words of Jesus in the 12th chapter of Luke. Jesus said that I came to cast fire and would that it were already kindled. You think that I came to bring peace but not peace but division, two against three and three against two. Casting fire upon the earth.

One of the martyrs, said that when Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized, a fire was kindled throughout the land. The Gospel of Thomas tells us that Jesus said, he who is near to me is near to the fire and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom. Luke and Matthew tells us there is one coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am unworthy to untie. He is coming and he will baptize with water and with fire.

When God decided in God's great time, to come down and confront Pharaoh and the Egyptians, he set a bush on fire. He told Moses to look at the bush. This is now holy ground. Let me tell you, holy ground is wherever God decides to confront pharaohs and empires and oppressors and killers and violators of the human life.

Jesus says "I came to cast fire upon the earth." Fire goes with the Holy Spirit but it's not the same as the Holy Spirit. Wherever Jesus is, wherever God encounters the human earth, the public, the politicians, the public arena, there is fire cast upon the earth.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. On Palm Sunday he enters Jerusalem and we call it Holy Week. What makes it Holy? Not just because he died and rose on Easter Sunday a week from then, it is holy because God confronts the Pharaohs of Jesus' day in Jerusalem. God comes and confronts the high priest, the scribes and all the other rulers of Jerusalem and finally confronts Herod himself.

It was the faithful journey of Jesus' toward his death and resurrection confronting powers and principalities in Holy Week that cast fires upon the earth and we call it Holy! "I've come to be baptized and I wish it was already completed." Jesus as a faithful witness and martyr confronted the powers and principalities of Jerusalem and doing so cast fires upon the earth.

And today, whenever we meet with the Herod's of our own day, when we advocate for justice and work to put an end to the violence in our land we are living out our baptism by casting healing fires upon the earth. If we take our baptism seriously, we cannot escape the dividing fire of Jesus.

Do you think I came to bring peace? No but division. We all want peace don't we? We'd like to have the kind of peace that would allow us not to deal with all the fighting and the violence and the divisions among us but I tell you God's plan is for us to confront the divisions and the fighting and the violence with baptismal fire.

Let me put it this way. There was a boy, a teenager, who was a headstrong boy. Every farm chore that his parents would give him he wouldn't do. His parents became completely out of their heads with frustration. His father said, "This is what I'm going to do, son." He walked his son down to the gate post at the entrance to their farm. He said, "Every time you disobey I'm going to drive a nail into the post so you can get a chance to see what you are like." So every time the son disobeyed he put a nail in the post. Soon the post was covered with nails. And when the son saw the post covered with nails

he broke down and cried. And so the dad said to the son, "Every time you are obedient I'll pull a nail out of the post, as a sign of forgiveness." And so as the son began to turn his life around in obedience to his parents the nails disappeared. And the time came for the final nail to be pulled out of the post. So when the final nail was pulled out the father expected the son to be jubilant and rejoice. But the son instead broke out in even deeper tears and anguish. And the father said, "Son, I thought you'd be pleased. I pulled out all the nails. You are forgiven." The son said, "but dad, the holes are still there."

You see sisters and brothers, we have an awful lot of holes to fill up. We have an awful lot of people who need to be made whole again. We have an awful lot of tribes who have been violated and the holes are still there.

Jesus has claimed us in baptism and has cast fires upon the earth. The task is now before us to fill in those holes. If we do this, it will be painful and we may be met with violence and there's even the possibility of death, but it is our baptismal calling to help make humanity whole again. The holes are still there.

In Hebrews 12 we hear these words: "Therefore...surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses we must run with perseverance the race that is set before us." One part of that race is to continue to cast fire upon the earth by our faithful living by our speaking out, by saying no to injustice. By acting as if we are a child of God when others would put us down as if we are nobody. We are called to cast fire upon the earth and cause divisions but we are also in the process healing and filling up all the holes that are there.

On Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, two of his disciples, James and John, came up to him and said Lord when you come into your kingdom, grant us the honor of sitting on your right hand and on your left hand. And Jesus said you do not know what you are asking...are you able to be baptized with the baptism which I have been baptized. And they replied, "Yes we are able." And Jesus said you shall be.

But they were not able to drink the cup that Jesus drank, or endure the baptism of fire that he endured on the cross. But they ran the race set before them and in our baptism we are called to run the race God sets before us. We don't have an option. As a child of God, adopted into the cloud of witnesses, we are brothers and sisters of John the Baptist and all the disciples and martyrs who ran the race down through the ages, and in our own time we are brothers and sisters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rosa Parks, of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., of Cesar Chavez and Dorothy Day. It is a race that has been set before me and you.

And let me say something about witnesses. They are not spectators like going out to a Raiders game and having a tailgate party then going into the game to see who wins and who loses. We are not called to be that kind of witness. The cloud of witnesses mentioned in Hebrews are men and women who have already run the race and have already received the approval of God. So they can stand alongside of you and encourage you. When you fall down they can pick you back up again. And when you feel like turning around and going the other way, they say not now, stay on the path, take one more step. We would not be here today without that cloud of witnesses standing alongside us.

I don't know how many of you have participated in sports. I used to play basketball. And I know that in playing basketball I always played a little harder when there were witnesses cheering me on. I

always gave more of my energy because of that cloud of witnesses, who were not spectators, but active participants in my struggle, in my race.

The writer of the book of Hebrews says of this cloud of witnesses that all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised. Oh my...that's not very good advertising is it. That's not good news at all!

All these...Moses and Sarah and Abraham, John the Baptist, Frederick, Martin, Rosa, Dietrich, Cesar and Dorothy Day...all died in faith not having received the promise. But God has prepared something special for them so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. Can you hear that as good news?

Those who have gone before us haven't received the promises of God because they are waiting for us to live out our baptism and complete our race.

How many of you know anything about bowling? You know that in bowling if you bowl two balls and knock all the pins down you get a spare, and that spare means that the next ball you bowl you will get to add 10 points to increase your score. And if you get a strike you can add up the next two balls and increase your score even more, so that at even at the end you can add up to 20 points to your score if you get a final strike.

The writer to the Hebrews is saying that we get the opportunity to add value to the score of our ancestors. By the way you run the race, you can add value to your those who have come before you. I can add value to my father's race, and to my mother's race. I can add value to Martin's race. I can add value by the way I run the race in my own time. As I confront the Pharaohs of my day, I can add to the worth and value of all who came before me.

I don't know about you but I am glad this morning that I have the opportunity to run the race that my ancestors started out and by my running I can add value.

I presided at a memorial service yesterday of a man 87 years of age, who ran the race for 40 years in the bay area. At every opportunity he was there advocating for peace and justice, he was on the picket line, going to jail, standing up for those who could not stand up for themselves. We put him to rest yesterday but I'm glad today that you and I can still add value to the race he ran. That's good news. By the way you run the race that is set before you, you can add value to your mother's race and your father's race because God has started something special that apart from you they can't complete it.

Can you imagine! God promises that someday there will be a great reunion. That's why I stay in the race. I want to see it to the end. I want to get to the end with my fathers and mothers and my brothers and sisters. Yes, to see all who have gone before us, let us run the race together. Amen!

Sermon delivered by Rev. Phil Lawson

August 18, 2013

Miracles of Faith Lutheran, Oakland, CA

Introductory paragraphs - Rev. Carol Been,

Justice & Advocacy Ministry, Sierra Pacific Synod, ELCA