



January 13, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 3:15-17, 21-11

“Baptized with Fire”

There’s a joke pastors sometimes appreciate.

Three pastors met for coffee one morning. To their surprise they discovered that all their churches had problems with bats in the buildings where they ministered. The bats were making a terrible mess.

“I got so mad,” the first pastor said, “I took a shotgun and fired at them. It made holes in the ceiling the Trustees are upset about, but the bats are still doing fine.”

The second pastor said, “I tried trapping them alive. I caught them all right, then I drove 50 miles out of town and released them. But they beat me back to the church!”

The third pastor spoke quietly. “I haven’t had any more problems with the bats at my church,” he said. “What did you do?” the others asked, amazed. “Oh, I just baptized and confirmed them,” he said, “and I haven’t seen them since!”

That’s a story that can lead us to laugh or cry. There’s truth there. Sometimes people come to a church desiring baptism, for themselves or for their children. There’s something they’re looking for. But after the baptismal rite itself, they seem to have found it and they disappear. Our prayers go with them, that God will continue to guide them on their journey, and one day help them hear the call of Christ to follow him and lead a life of active discipleship.

However, we ALL can benefit from reflecting on our OWN baptism and discipleship—and today is the day for us to do that. This is the day in the church

year when we remember JESUS' baptism. At that moment God made it plain that Jesus was filled with God's own power and God's own Spirit.

Let's consider, then, the meaning of baptism in OUR lives. We all have ways of pulling away from God—ways we may do a “disappearing act” of some kind.

When we think of baptism, our first thoughts are of water. What does being baptized by water mean?

A story is told of an old mountain preacher who was baptizing converts at a revival meeting. A wiry, sharp-eyed old man came forward, asking to be baptized. The preacher led the man into the water. He then asked a question, which is NOT part of our practice in the United Methodist Church: “Is there any reason why the ordinance of baptism should not be administered?” After a pause an observer remarked: “Preacher, I don't want to interfere in your business, but that's an old sinner you've got out there, and that one dip won't do him any good; you'll have to anchor him out in deep water overnight.”

When we think of water, we think of being washed and made clean. We think of renewal and refreshment. We think of forgiveness for sin, and of God's love and grace being poured over and into us.

All of this is good. All of this is true. But we need to remember two things:

FIRST- The water in our tradition is a symbol. It has no special unique power of its own. If hope for new life and cleansing was based on the power of the water, the man at the mountain revival was right--- we'd all need a lot MORE water to be used, and at frequent intervals! The water is a symbol.

SECOND- The power and action in baptism comes from God. WE don't do it. WE don't make it happen. GOD does. The focus is not on the child or adult being baptized, but on God. Grace is not given based on the amount of water, the kind of water, or the heart of the one being baptized. Grace is just given, pure and simple—a free gift. Baptism is a symbol of God's grace freely given. That is beautifully apparent when little ones are baptized, who are too young to speak for themselves. THEY haven't done anything at all—and God's grace is with them as an unconditional, unearned gift.

In Vienna, Austria, there's a church where the Hapsburgs, a former ruling family, are buried. There was a special ritual followed for these burials. When the royal procession arrived at the church, the mourners leading the procession knocked on the door of the church.

“Who is it that desires admission here?” a priest asked through the door.

“His apostolic majesty, the emperor!” was the reply.

The priest answered, “I don’t know him.”

The mourners knocked a second time, with the priest repeating, “Who desires admission here?”

This time the funeral guard answered, “The highest emperor.”

Again, “I don’t know him,” echoed in reply.

Finally, a third knock on the door brought forth a last question, “Who is it?”

“A poor sinner, your brother,” was the answer. And at this point the door was opened and the funeral completed.

This represents the needed attitude for baptism and discipleship: one of total humility. The water doesn’t save us. Our noble intentions and vigorous striving do not save us. God, acting out of total self-giving love, saves us. That’s the **FIRST THING** to remember about the meaning of baptism in our lives: It’s a symbol of God’s unconditional, embracing love and grace.

Another image can help us as we think about what baptism means to us. The word “baptizo” was a word used in the first century for dipping a light colored garment into a dye. Once the fabric was dipped, it was changed. The waters of baptism are like that. The water symbolizes a substance we pass through, and we emerge with a new identity. Once we were no people, but now we are God’s people. Baptism is also a sign of God’s **CALL TO US to BE NEW PEOPLE** who live and walk in the ways of Jesus Christ.

So, this is what we know about baptism:

Through it we receive the unearned love and grace of God, which washes away our sin and brings us healing and renewal, changing us and knitting together hurts and wounds that have been inflicted by the sins of others. We are forgiven, cleansed and made new by God’s grace.

THEN-

And we go forward from our baptism committed to **BE NEW PEOPLE** walking in the ways of Christ.

There's one more thing to consider. John the Baptist said that HIS OWN baptism was "with water". For John, the water symbolized what we've been talking about: God's cleansing power that washed away sin and brought forth people with changed hearts and changed lives. Many religious traditions include ritual washing—the Jews in John's time engaged in many forms of ritual washing. So what John was doing in the Jordan River would have been somewhat familiar to the Jewish people. But John added something: "The one who is coming," he said, "will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

I think we often stop with the baptism of John in our thinking about baptism. We accept the saving, cleansing gift. We may even try to accept the call to live in new ways, but do we move from the water to the fire?

Water is wonderful. But it also can be soggy, clammy, cold, and a fire extinguishing agent. Water can wet the proverbial blanket- and we all recoil from wet blankets. In thinking of baptism, we need to welcome the fire of the Holy Spirit. As God's baptized ones, we are CALLED to catch fire with the Holy Spirit. Through the fiery presence of God's Holy Spirit, God goes with us through all life brings.

It is the fire of God's Spirit that equips us to live in the midst of a dangerous and difficult world.

Smokejumpers know about "fighting fire with fire". Fire travels faster uphill than down, unlike most anything else in nature. A person can't outrun a fire lashing at his heels as he charges uphill. His only hope is to start another fire, a "safety fire". The smaller fire burns towards the main blaze, providing a safety zone behind itself that allows the firefighters enough time to escape.

On fire with the Holy Spirit, we can embrace a life that relies on spiritual forces, on the power of God made known in the love of Christ to battle the powers of hatred and evil in this world and in ourselves.

Friends, we need the water of baptism. We need to rejoice and remember that water. It cleanses and refreshes us— heals us and dyes us with beautiful colors. But we must not let any water quench the fire of the Holy Spirit that calls us to actively LIVE our faith. In our tradition, those baptized as infants or young children must claim and make the vows of their baptism for THEMSELVES when they are confirmed as youth or join the church as baptized adults. We're called to be people baptized with water AND BAPTIZED WITH FIRE.

Let me close with a story shared by James Harnish, a pastor in Florida.

An English bishop visited a sleepy little parish along the river Thames. The village priest was discouraged and depressed, not accomplishing very much. Finally, the priest confessed, "Bishop, I can't say that we are setting the Thames on fire." The bishop looked him in the eye and said, "Brother, I am not in the least concerned about setting the Thames on fire. What I want to know is, if I take YOU out and drop you in it, will you sizzle?"

That's a good question for the beginning of this new year: Will you??

May God's Spirit set us on fire for love, justice, hope and truth in 2008. So be it. Amen.

(Invite those who wish to come to the chancel area at the close of the service, to experience a renewal of their baptism.)