

JANUARY 9, 2021 -THE FIRE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
Our Gospel comes from Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

So today, we celebrate the baptism of the Lord. Of course, last week was the Epiphany. That word, meaning to appear or make known, and every year, the Sunday after the Epiphany is the Baptism of the Lord, when the Father's voice booms from heaven, making known that Jesus is indeed his Son. And speaking of the Father's voice, it's a rare appearance, the Father's voice booming from heaven. The only other time I know of is the Mount of Transfiguration, when that same voice booms from heaven, "This is my Son, listen to him," begging the question, do we? Today we find ourselves in the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of Luke. And John the Baptist is standing on the muddy banks of the River Jordan. Of course, we've been talking about John the Baptist lately, as we went through Advent. I love John the Baptist, this man with a message. And that message, by the way, is the kingdom of God is upon you, repent and believe in the Gospel. A message, dare I say, that rings as true today as the day it was first proclaimed. And we've mentioned this a time or two in the past, but it's worth remembering that John the Baptist, as important a person as he was, the critical role that he played in salvation history, it's truly amazing how little we really know about this man. First time we hear about John the Baptist is when he leaps in his mother's womb. Of course, that's Elizabeth, when a pregnant Mary comes to visit. But then we hear nothing. Scripture is silent, we hear nothing until he shows up on the banks of the Jordan. So, what do we know about John the Baptist? Well, like I said, not much, but we do know that he was the answer to many prayers from both his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah. So, he's a miracle baby for sure, because Elizabeth was barren, and could not produce a son, which was a very big problem for Zechariah, given the fact that he was a **Zadok** priest, which is a hereditary priesthood, a long line of priests handed down to first born son. And if you don't got a son, well, then that's the end. Poor Zechariah, it was the end of the line for him. But then the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah, and assures him that his prayers had in fact been answered. Oh, happy day, but then in time, this miracle baby would end up walking away from his family destiny,

walking away, rejecting temple sacrificial worship all together, just walked away. Must've been incredibly painful for his parents at the time. But then, like I said, the Scriptures go silent. We don't know what happened. I mean, we've talked about this in the past, but there has been some speculation that John might've joined this mysterious conservative sect of monks, called the Essenes, who are living in the deserts of Qumran at the time. And the belief is supported by the fact that these Essenes had a water baptism as part of their initiation right. So, the thinking being, well, maybe this is where John might have gotten the idea of baptism, but we don't really know, it's pure speculation. But we do know that at some point he walked away from the Essenes, and the Holy Spirit whispered in his ear, that, "Yes, indeed, you have a mission, but rather than being a Levitical priest in the Temple, your mission is to herald the coming of the Messiah." The people were filled with expectation, and were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. Now remember, there's definitely a heightened expectation for the coming of a Messiah at the time. The Pharisees had asked John that question, "**Are you** the Messiah, are you the One? **Are you** the One that's gonna lead us? Are you the One that's going to rebel with us against our enemies? **Are you** the One who's going to establish righteousness on the Earth, the One that will return Israel to its rightful place as a shining city on the hill?" And you know, as we're talking about this, even though it's been 2,000 years, and we don't necessarily use the same language, our world is still really looking for a Messiah. Somebody that will lead us and guide us to a better way, whether that might be a politician that we elect, or a self- help book that we might read, or a seminar that we might attend, we're all kinda looking for somebody, some Messiah that might lead us, and guide us to a better way. John answered them, "**I'm baptizing you with water, but One mightier than I is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire.**" The Gospel of Matthew describes a voice of one in the wilderness, calling out, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths for Him." So that's his message, the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent and believe in the Gospel.

Like I said, a message that is true today as the day it was first spoken, "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

You know, the prophet **Malachi**, which is the last book in the Old Testament, foretold this moment, when he wrote, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His Temple." Now, of course, when I hear that word temple, I'm thinking like a big building of some sort. But not so for John the Baptist. His temple was the River Jordan.

But John never claimed to be the Messiah, which, you know, I think it might've been tempting, but he never did.

He never claimed to be the Messiah. In fact, he went the other way.

He said, "I'm not even worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals," which by the way, is the **work of a slave**.

So, this is a pretty powerful image.

This coming Messiah is so powerful, that John the Baptist is not even up to the task of doing what a slave would do.

And he goes on to say, "And He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Now what comes next?

And we've talked about this issue a time or two before, but the people who put the liturgy of the Word together, which is what we read, and understand these people are much smarter than I am, okay, I mean I'm sure they have their reasons, but whatever those reasons might be, sometimes they skip verses that are kind of important.

And certainly, that's the case today.

So, we're just gonna add those verses back in, starting with verse 17 and verse 18, which we did not read in our Gospel today.

"His winnowing fan is in His hand to clear His threshing floor, and to gather wheat into His barn, but the chaff, He will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, let's talk about this.

First of all, what's a winnowing fan?

Well, a winnowing fan, also known as a **winnowing fork**, well, it's like a pitchfork, which is a bit odd, because I think most of us associate a pitchfork with Diablo.

But here we have John Baptist describing Jesus coming, holding this winnowing fan, this pitchfork. So, this winnowing fan, or this pitchfork, is used to scoop up wheat and throw it into the air.

So, the idea is that when you throw the wheat up into the air, gravity, of course, causes it to fall back to the ground, and the wind separates the chaff.

Now the chaff, of course, is the waste.

So, John the Baptist is using this very powerful **metaphor**, which of course, you know, they're all farmers, they would've understood, to describe how the Messiah is going to preserve what is valuable, while at the same time destroy what is worthless, just like a farmer would do.

Now through the years, I've always kinda looked at that line and thought, "Well, this is representing separating good people from bad people," but you know, I'm not so sure about that.

I'm thinking that maybe it's more about separating the good and bad in all of us.

I mean, 'cause let's face it, all of us have good and bad in us, the good and the bad that occupy our hearts.

So, I'm thinking that the chaff is the sin that is mixed with our wheat.

And Jesus, through the Cross, is sifting us like a farmer would sift wheat.

I'm reminded of the time when Jesus said to Peter, "**Satan's gonna sift you like wheat**," but I'm thinking at that time what He's talking about is that Satan is gonna put his finger on your sin, and use it against you, because of course he does.

Satan's interested in your chaff.

He will collect it, and use it against you.

Of this, there is no doubt, but let us never forget that Jesus conquered Satan.

Satan's got no power over Jesus. That battle has already been won.

Satan has no power over the believing Christian, who stands in the shadow of the Cross.

And while it is true that our sins will be exposed on the threshing floor, John the Baptist is making it very clear

that our Lord and Savior will be focusing on saving the wheat.

And the chaff, it will burn away to purify the wheat, which is why when we stand before the cross, and repent of our sin, when we receive the Eucharist in humility, and repent of our sin, forgiveness is promised.

And the chaff falls away to be swept away, and burned away, as like it never even happened.

And that, my friend, in a nutshell is what the Good News is all about.

Sometimes the people who put together the liturgy of the Word, and I'm sure they have the reasons, drop verses.

And sometimes those verses are kind of important. So, let's add a couple more back in.

Remember now, we're in the 3rd chapter of Luke, let us now consider verses 19 and 20, which again, we did not read in our Gospel today.

"Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached the Good News to the people. Now Herod the Tetrarch, who had been censured by him," of course, censured by John the Baptist, "because of

Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of the many evil deeds that Herod had committed, added still another evil deed by putting John in prison." Now this verse is really odd, because remember now, Luke is very clinical in his writing, very methodical, very precise, detail oriented. He writes in an orderly sequence. But for whatever reason, he's going off the farm right here by putting John the Baptist in prison, which causes confusion. Is John baptizing Jesus at the River Jordan today, or is he in prison? Well, to answer that quandary, we need to understand that **Luke divides history into three** distinct ages, or epochs, if you will.

The first age is the age of the **Prophets**. The second age is the age of **Jesus**. The third age is the age of the **Holy Spirit**, which by the way, is the age we find ourselves living in today. So anyway, getting back to our question, why would Luke put John in prison right here? Well, I think, and we're just talking here, but I think that he's trying to make a clear distinction that that first era, or **Age of the Prophets, it's over**. And when he writes, "after all the people have been baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized, and was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form, like a dove," Luke is clearly introducing that second age of Jesus. An age that will last until the Ascension, when nine days after the Ascension, Pentecost ushers in the third age of the Holy Spirit, which like I said, is the age that we find ourselves living in today. This age is marked by the fact that the Holy Spirit can now dwell in the hearts of those who are born again. It is an age of fire, and my friend, this is a huge issue, because there's a whole lot of people out there whose faith is centered on the historical Jesus, but are not living in the age under the power of the Holy Spirit. We might go to church; we might know all about Jesus. We might quibble over the historical Jesus, the Virgin birth, the miracles, or even the resurrection, but in doing so, we have reduced our faith to nothing more than a history lesson. And that ain't Christianity, and that ain't living in Christ. There's many of us who know all about Jesus, but we've never met Him. And that's because you only meet Jesus when you seek Jesus. And when you seek Jesus, He sends his Holy Spirit. And it is that Holy Spirit that reveals us to Him.

So, by the way, the Holy Spirit is available to you today, right here, right now. Let us never forget, Jesus said, "We must be born from above." Our faith is not a matter of just believing hard enough in the historical Jesus. We do not practice a **red ruby slipper theology**, you know, when Dorothy, she taps her shoes together, and says, "No place like home, there's no place at home." And if she really believes hard enough, she'll get home. That's not Christianity. That's certainly not what Jesus died on the cross to accomplish. John the Baptist tells us that "Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire." Of course, that fire is the Holy Spirit, which is poured upon the world at Pentecost. The Gospel of John tells us all about this fire, or this Holy Spirit, in my favorite chapter, the 14th chapter, and what does it say? "If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate who will help you and be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, a Spirit that this world cannot accept, because it neither sees it or knows it. But you know it, for it will be with you, and it will be in you." Now watch this, He's standing in front of the disciples when He says these words, "It remains with you," because at the time the Holy Spirit was residing in Jesus. But He's about ready to go, He's about ready to ascend into heaven. And so now He's saying, "It will be in you." What's that? Well, that's Pentecost. And what's Pentecost? It's the opportunity for the born-again believer to have the Holy Spirit live inside of us, if we allow Him. And what is that? Well, again, that's Luke's 3rd age, the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. And like I said, it's available to you today, if you allow it. Remember now Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans. In a little while longer, this world will no longer see me, but you will see me because I live, and you will live. On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." So once again, how do we believe in Jesus? Well, the Holy Spirit reveals Him to us. "After all the people had been baptized, and Jesus had also been baptized, and He was praying, heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended

upon Him in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven saying, you are my beloved Son, with You I am well pleased."

Now notice that it says, "After Jesus was baptized, and was praying."

My friend, you can participate in communion. You can try to live a righteous life.

You can do good things, but the fact is this, your chaff is always with you.

And because of that, you are separated from God. Now watch this, okay, it says "Jesus is praying that the Holy Spirit dwells upon Him."

He's praying. What about you? What about me?

Do we spend time praying very much like the disciples prayed for nine days after Jesus ascended, and Pentecost came?

That "nine days" is called the first novena by the RC's in history. And what came?

A strong wind.

It sounded like a train, tongues of fire.

The gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on this world.

And I can assure you that my ministry would not exist today if that Spirit had not been poured out on this world so long ago.

How do we receive the Holy Spirit? How do we get this Spirit?

Well, you know, there's this great story in the 2nd chapter of the book of Acts, this is right after the Gospels, and it talks all about the Pentecost.

You should read this, but this is really good stuff. And it talks all about the day that the Holy Spirit was poured out into this world.

And Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit, and so he steps out on the balcony.

He went from cowering, Peter in the upper room, to boldly-preaching Peter, and whatever he said, I don't know what it was, but he converted **3,000** people.

And what do they say?

"And what shall we do?"

And Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins and," wait for it, "you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Again, this is the age we find ourselves living in, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is how your chaff is separated from your wheat.

Now, many of us have been baptized, and this is a good thing.

But when was the last time we repented of our chaff? Do we even hear the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit?

Or do we allow the noise of this world to drown that voice out?

I want you to imagine you're at a party, and it's crowded, and the room is full of people talking.

And you're talking with somebody, and you're involved in a conversation, you're talking, you're listening to them and they're talking, and all of a sudden, you very clearly hear your name spoken across the room.

Now, these people aren't calling for you, they're talking about you.

What do you do?

Well, if you're like most people, I would think that, well, we would continue to at least pretend we're listening to whoever's talking to us.

But all the while we would be straining to hear what was being said about us on the other side of the room.

We would try to filter out whatever the surrounding noise was, and isolate on that one conversation that involves us, on the other side of the room.

That's prayer, my friend.

That is prayer, when we hear the faint call of our Lord from the other side of the room, we have to strain and filter out all the noise to hear the quiet voice.

There's a lot of noise in this world, and that's what our prayer should be, "Lord, I wanna hear your voice."

Prayer is not a wish list, my friend.

I mean, not to say there's anything wrong with petitioning our Lord in prayer.

I mean, we're told we can do that, but do we need to live there?

What about this prayer?

"Lord, let me hear you. Lord, not my will, but your will be done. Let me see you, Lord. Let your Holy Spirit come and dwell in me today. I turn my will and my life over to the care of you."

My friends, John the Baptist once said, "I must decrease, so that He may increase."

And we need to do the same, because in the end, there's only one person that can sit on the throne of your life.

It's either you, or it's Him.

Who sits on the throne of your life today? "His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor, and to gather wheat into his barn." "But the chaff, he will burn with unquenchable fire."

What chaff is on your threshing floor today? Let us look to the Cross.

If we accept what He is freely offering us, that chaff is burned away.

Let us strain to hear the quiet voice.

Jesus promised us that He would send us the **Advocate** that would teach us all things, but it's only gonna teach us all things if we hear it.

Are you hearing the quiet voice today?

Which by definition is quiet, and will not compete with the screaming voices of this world.

And since it won't raise itself up, we gotta dial ourselves in.
Won't you dial yourself into that quiet voice today?
It's a voice that will not only guide you through the chaos of this present world, but ultimately bring you home.

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*Hi all of you,
Hoping everyone had a great Christmas and season.
We are now in the Season of Epiphany and today is actually Orthodox Christmas. Yesterday, Epiphany, was the Eastern Christian Christmas. You recall that the first split in the church was East and West disagreeing over leadership, bread, things that became a big deal.*

The Christmas Season is 12 Days, reason for the song. Just remember that Luke's story of Christmas doesn't have a happy ending like: It's a Wonderful Life, the Grinch, Rudolph, or Charlie Brown. I've been hearing some good things about some of you; helping with taking down Christmas decorations, sitting with grandma after her surgery. You're reaching out to another is kind and good and it is good to hear about your willingness to share time for others.

Don't forget to invite other's to check us out on line or in-person and for sure, we want some younger folks to step up to lead song and worship once in a while. You are the ones that know the newer songs! Every one of us passes the baton at some time. Maybe it will be to you. KatieD+

Our Church Hymnal doesn't have any of the contemporary Christian music. Please share your favorites with me so the community can begin to learn some newer music.