

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor  
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, January December 9, 2022**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent/Year C**  
**First Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7**  
**Second Reading: Acts 8:14-17**  
**Gospel Reading: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**  
**Sermon Title: “Baptized with the Holy Spirit & Fire!”**

## **Theme**

*The reading opens with questions about the identity of the Messiah. John the Baptist insists that he is not the Messiah; instead he points ahead to one who is coming. And whether the voice of God was heard by all or only by Jesus, God settles the matter: Jesus is God’s beloved Son.*

## **Text**

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>21</sup>Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>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.”

## Sermon

Today is the Principal Festival of the Baptism of Our Lord. Interesting, don't you think, that today, the day upon which we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus, the Gospel Reading didn't include it. Look closely – the reading jumps right over it. The reading had more to do with John than Jesus. Uncharacteristically, Luke simply reported that Jesus was baptized. Of course, then there was that disembodied voice from heaven – that was pretty impressive.

Though today is the Principal Festival of the Baptism of our Lord, I think it is okay that Luke doesn't make much of a big deal out of it. But we sure should. And let me be clear about that – we should make a big deal out of our baptisms. And to do that, we need to look at all three readings prescribed for the day.

Through the prophet Isaiah, we hear the LORD say,

<sup>1b</sup>Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

In the baptismal education I make candidates for baptism go through, I teach that whether we acknowledge it or not, we were created by God. Our life is a gift of God. As parents, we make think we bring our children to be baptized; or in the case of people at or above the age of reason, we may think we've made the decision for baptism ourselves, but that is not what is going on. And this passage confirms it. In this passage, God said, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Notice that this is *past tense*. God has already acted. Parents who want their children baptized, or people at or above the age of reason who seek baptism for themselves are merely responding to the call of God.

Baptism is a covenant agreement. You hear it in the Rite of Baptism and the Reception of New Members – which by the way are nearly identical on purpose, because you see, baptism is considered the beginning of the Christian's life, and serious promises are made by the parents, sponsors, or the candidates for baptism themselves. You will hear those promises listed when we baptize and receive new members.

The covenant amounts to a commitment to teach the faith in the case of children and to learn the faith in the case of folks at or above the age of reason. Though parents are the "first teachers of the faith" according to Martin Luther, the church provides for the instruction of the faith too. And instruction in the faith is a never-ending commitment. It does not end with Children's Sunday School and Confirmation. It continues until we are blessed to see our Savior face to face.

You may be asking, "Does it really matter?"

To answer that question, I want to re-introduce you to a Hollywood star. Do you remember Ann Jillian?



Ann Jillian is a Hollywood actress who got her start as a child star whose stage name was given to her by Walt Disney himself before starring in 1961's "Babes in Toyland." Just a year later, she appeared in 1962's "Gypsy". Jillian successfully grew up in the public eye and went on to star in the TV series "It's a Living" from 1980 until 1986. In 1985, Jillian was faced with a cancer diagnosis at age 35, which she fought – and won. Ann is now 71 and has reflected on her long career in Hollywood for an autobiography, and when asked what she credits her success to she said,

"My faith, which my parents taught to me, became a part of the very fabric of who I am. My faith has kept me grounded. And when you're grounded, you're prepared for whatever happens."

The Gospel according to Ann Jillian of Hollywood – bet you never thought you'd hear that in church!

For most of us, baptism is the beginning of a life of faith. As for myself, my parents always took me and my siblings to church and Sunday School. At 62 years old now, I still remember many of my teachers and many of their lessons. Through their diligence, I learned that a life of faith matters. To quote Ann Jillian, "My faith has kept me grounded. And when you're grounded, you're prepared for whatever happens."

The Second Reading contains the story of a weird-ism from the Apostolic Period. Let me remind you that the book of Acts contains stories of the post-resurrection Apostles who were inspired by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to do amazing things. However, because Jesus didn't leave a book of theology behind when he ascended into Heaven, the Apostles were often left to try to figure out what God was doing.

In our Second Reading from Acts chapter eight, some of the Apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaritans had accepted the Gospel. "What Samaritans!" you exclaim? Yes, Samaritans!

Here, let me remind you that after the reign of King Solomon, the unified kingdom of Israel divided into the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. However, in the Davidic Covenant God made with the Israelites God said that there would always be a descendent of David on the throne of Israel, and Jerusalem was the only appropriate place God could be worshiped. Because the northern kingdom of Israel broke the Davidic Covenant they lived in apostasy – in other words, they were living disobediently.

As a result of their disobedience, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed and its people were dispersed all over the Babylonian empire until Assyria defeated the Babylonians and they were allowed to return. But when they returned, they were known as the Samaritans – most likely because they inhabited a region called Samaria. But over the years, their faith and traditions had drifted from Judaism to include some pagan aspects and that is the reason for the animosity between Jews and Samaritans in the New Testament.

Back to the Second Reading from Acts chapter eight, the Apostles were astonished that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was accepted among these infidels! But rather than reject them from the start, Peter and John, two of Jesus' inner circle, went to see what was going on. When they got there, they discovered that the Samaritans had accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ but were not baptized under the Trinitarian formula, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as Jesus commanded at the Great Commission, and therefore had not received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit! So the Apostles laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit – Samaritans! Fascinating! I am sure they were astonished at what the Holy Spirit was doing through these people the Jews considered unclean!

In the Lutheran tradition, when a person is baptized, hands are laid on the head of the baptized and a prayer is said invoking the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on their lives. Will anything dramatic happen? I don't know. Nothing dramatic has ever happened in any of the baptisms I've presided over – but most of them were babies.

Does God require baptism and the laying on of hands before anything good can come out of a person's life? No!

Can the Holy Spirit dwell in a person who is not baptized? That is a very good question. I'm never going to question the work of the Holy Spirit, which is itself a mystery.

In the Gospel Reading, John the Baptizer said the one following him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire! That sounds pretty dramatic! What could that mean? I would not dare to say, and furthermore, I would never dare to limit the power or initiative of the Holy Spirit to my understanding.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

So what does all this mean for you and me? I'm so glad you asked. Baptism can come before faith, like most of us who were baptized as infants. Baptism can also come as a faithful response by people at or above the age of reason. The same can be said for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will operate within anyone it wants. But what I really think this whole day is about is recognizing the activity of the Holy Spirit as this spiritual force that we can tap into to do things for Christ that we wouldn't normally have the insight, power, resources, or whatever, to do. And I think that all people of faith, baptized or not, need to make a better effort to tap into it. Let's pray about that.

### **Prayer**

Empowering God, we give you thanks for the sacrament of baptism by which we accept your claim on our lives. We trust that your Holy Spirit dwells in us even when we don't see it or feel it. But it is that, O Lord, for which we pray. Make your presence known in our lives, and may our lives demonstrate your Spirit's presence through the lives we live. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen