

**Grace Lutheran Church + 40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA**  
**The Baptism of Our Lord + January 9, 2022**  
**“Baptism With Fire” + Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

<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.”

I have to admit I came up with this sermon title before I had any idea what I was going to say. It has just been one of those weeks, and the bulletin needed to be printed. So I picked the most image in this reading, “baptism with fire,” hoping I could make something of it. But surprise--even in the midst of this week’s flurries of activity, the Holy Spirit was still working, because when I finally sat down with it I realized it’s perfect for this day, this year, and the general situation in which we find ourselves.

When I Googled the phrase, I learned that In the military “baptism by fire” refers to a soldier’s first experience of live combat. Pentecostalism co-opted the term to refer to the ecstatic coming of the Holy Spirit into a person by which they would then speak in tongues. The Mormon Church uses the phrase in reference to the process of being born again, which “cleanses and burns dross and evil out of human souls as though by fire.”

This is clearly not what John the Baptist meant; Jesus never burned the evil out of anyone. Was John referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, since we have that image in Acts 2 of tongues of flame appearing on the heads of the disciples? But neither is this something Jesus did-- at Pentecost he had already ascended to be with his Father.

I think we find the clue later in Luke. In Luke 12:49-50 Jesus thunders to the crowds who by then numbered in the thousands: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which I am to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!”

What baptism was he talking about? As we just heard, he had already been baptized. I think here in Luke 12 he was addressing the big picture of what God the Father had called him to do, and he is impatient to get on with it. He must know, all or at least in part, what lies ahead. Through his

death on the cross the world would be redeemed. As we chant on Good Friday, “Behold the life-giving cross, on which was hung the Savior of the world!”

And how was that salvation accomplished? The Apostles’ Creed tells us it was when Jesus descended to the dead. After the tomb was sealed he entered the fires of hell, did battle with Satan, and was victorious so that he could rise early on Easter morning in a newly resurrected body, so that the promise of eternal life would thereafter and forever animate every breath of Christian believers. This, then, was baptism with fire. Just as we enter the waters of baptism and rise out of them newly clothed in Christ, forever changed, so Jesus descended into fires of hell, and rose out of the flames transformed. His vocation was no longer to proclaim the kingdom of God but now, in his resurrected body, to be with us always. “Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I suggest, then, that baptism with fire refers to the way in which each of us enters our true, lasting vocation, a life-giving process that necessarily strips or maybe even burns away the old self so that the new person can emerge. For me it was a slow burn over many years, a journey of doubt, discovery, and questions such as “Really, God, are you sure?”

For some it is a more searing experience. I think of my friend Ava, who I got to know in the homeless ministry I used to be involved in. Ava had lived a prosperous middle-class life with a good job at the Postal Service headquarters downtown, a husband who was a successful local politician, and a son who lived up to his name of Champ. But depression had always dogged her. Almost imperceptibly Ava slipped into drugs, and slowly everything unravelled. She lost her job, her marriage, and ended up on the street in and out of jail for drug possession.

When Ava first turned up at the church she was disheveled and barely spoke. But she came faithfully to the weekly meal, and finally asked if she could help in the kitchen. When she realized she was welcomed and valued, her demeanor changed. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, spent most of her time reading the Bible or other devotional books, and ended up ministering to us far better than we ever had to her. All these years later she is still the most faith-filled person I know.

Everyone has some experience of being formed and transformed, of being shaped by fire into the servant God desires for you to be. What was your baptism by fire, and is it still ongoing or has it been completed? What about this church? Was Grace’s baptism by fire the actual fire, 10 years ago on New Year’s Eve? I would sincerely like to know. Did that experience change this congregation, or are you pretty much the same you were before the fire, except for this beautiful new worship space and other amenities?

Or, is our baptism by fire the pandemic? When it is all over, or at least when we can relax again, will we have experienced any transformation of our outlook on our ministry, our mission, on the ways we think ourselves in the community? Or will we be the same as we were before, “going back to normal,” as people put it? I sincerely hope not. I hope and pray that, above and beyond all the wonderful service projects that Grace engages in each year, the pandemic’s baptism by fire can spark new ideas, new ways of reaching people, new thoughts about what we can do as a church at the corner of Broad and Main. Some of those new ideas have already started to percolate. I want to hear yours, and I can’t wait to see where they take us in 2022. Amen.