

## Water, Spirit, Fire, Change

### Luke 3:15-22

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*As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 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 strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 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."*

*18 So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19 But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.*

*21 Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 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." (NRSVue)*

I recently started watching the Netflix docuseries "Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat" which is based off the cookbook and cooking adventures of chef Samin Nosrat. Please note that this does not mean I'm now interested in or care about cooking. I still find it tedious and irksome, I do not want a cookbook, I am not going to swap recipes. Do not expect this.

And that's part of why I've liked this show; it's only about cooking in the barest sense. There are four episodes, each one dealing with one of the pieces of the title. Nosrat travels the world to talk to folks about how cooking in every type of cuisine really comes down to these four things being combined in an infinite number of ways. The people who talk with her show how things so seemingly simple create delicious, filling meals, from the breakfast focaccia of seaside Italy or the umami-rich miso of rural Japan, but they also show the science of seaweed or the history of cheese more than any cooking. There are recipes, if you're into that, but my interest is in what the food *does*.

These four ingredients, Nosrat shows again and again, are part of a meal but are also definitions of culture, connections to history, invitations to deepened friendships, and declarations of how we relate to the bodies we feed. Salt, fat, acid, and heat produce so much more than food, Nosrat and her bevy of experts say; they create magical moments in time that something has changed, even if it's only your opinion of carrots when you've tasted them for the first time knowing how the heat at which they were simmered is different than any other heat in the meal.

After the intensity of the Christmas birth of Jesus and the adventure of the wise men honoring this new Christ, we come now in the Church year to the baptism of Jesus, the carpenter's son—and, Luke informs us, God's son as well. Remember, Luke is the so-called "gospel of the Gentiles" in that he is writing for the nascent Church that has moved away from being a branch denomination of Judaism and into being its own religion. Luke is focused on

telling a story that invites all into a Kingdom that is wildly different than the kings on their earthly thrones, and Luke's Jesus is squarely situated in the tradition of being One Who will bring good news to the poor and healing to the suffering.

The story opens with John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin who left his father's priestly trappings to become a prophet in the wilderness. John pulls no punches in his call to change, in his use of water to wash people clean of their old lives and birth them into the new. John speaks of one with a "winnowing fork" coming to the people; while this imagery often gets used to talk about judgment in a damnation sense, actual winnowing is about saving what is good and useful. Fred Craddock writes that, "When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news (v. 18). The primary aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff."<sup>1</sup> Luke himself states that John "proclaimed the *good* news" to the people who came to hear him at the river. The message of water that revitalizes is not hard to understand in a desert nation, and the idea of fire that burns away that which weighs down the grain makes sense to a mostly agrarian society. The ingredients are incredibly simple—salt, fat, acid, heat; water, fire. What John says God will do with them, though, is what makes all the difference.

And difference always, always comes with detractors, with those who fear the change these simple ingredients can make. John speaks loudly in an empire that does not want fire that purifies or water that cleanses; John's critique of Herod's divorce of his wife to marry his sister-in-law gains him no political friends and, before Jesus comes anywhere near this story, we see that it gains John quite a bit of backlash instead.

A clarification: this Herod is not the one we met last week. This is Herod Antipas, one of the few sons of Herod the Great who survived the familial massacre and became tetrarch of Galilee after his father's somewhat violent end.<sup>2</sup> (It's not the cuddliest familial line.) Herod Antipas' choice to marry Herodias was doubly shameful to his Jewish subjects, first for a divorce with really no acceptable grounds and second for marrying the wife of a still-living sibling. It was also deeply insulting to his brother Philip, who had also managed not only to survive their father but to be left part of Herod the Great's land in his will. Herod Antipas' remarriage declared, societally, that if Philip couldn't even keep hold of his wife, how could he rule over territory with any authority? Herod's marriage implicitly undermines his brother's political power, and if Philip can't rule, well, Herod is right here. What's a few more cities to answer to him, after all?

John, in his prophetic desert preaching, has repeatedly and very publicly called out the greed of the man in charge and, like many men in charge before and after him, Herod is not a fan. Luke tells us he "shuts John up in prison"—and will later have him killed—as we as readers are ushered back to Jesus' baptism.

Brian Stoffregen writes, "The Lucan account is much less about the actual baptism of Jesus than Christological statements about Jesus. 'The purpose of this passage is to introduce and begin to answer the vital question of Jesus' identity and mission in the Third Gospel as well as to

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<sup>1</sup> From his *Interpretation Commentary* on Luke, as quoted here: [Luke 3.15-17,21-22](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Herod | Biography, Facts, Reign, Temple, & Jesus | Britannica](#); [Herod Antipas | Biography, Jesus, John the Baptist, & Facts | Britannica](#)

highlight the work of the Holy Spirit in anointing people for ministry' (Sheila Klassan-Wiebe, 'Luke 3:15-17, 21-22,' Interpretation, October 1994, p. 397).

"In Luke, we aren't told where Jesus is baptized. We aren't told who baptizes him. The tradition that Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John comes from the other Gospels, but not in Luke."<sup>3</sup>

We are given John, who speaks truth to power; we are given John's fate for that choice; and then we are given what happens after the very quick baptism; this, writes Stoffregen, is what Luke is really trying to get us to see.

"[T]he heaven was opened, 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."

Water; fire; Spirit...change. Jesus' baptism is a pronouncement that God is doing something new, that the son of a small-town woman with a dubious beginning to her marriage is Someone with Whom *God Godself* is publicly pleased, that the water of the river and the holy fire of the winnowing fork and the physical dove of the Spirit are this Man's rightful claim. It's a powerful and political declaration, especially since God chose language that had hefty meaning. Professor Karoline Lewis points out that, "The voice from heaven (God's voice) identifies Jesus as God's son, in whom God is well pleased. In first century context, these words have less to do with the nature of Jesus and more with his purpose...The Jewish people used Psalm 2 at the coronation of a new monarch...[in which] God adopts the monarch as God's son. Thus, God adopts Jesus as divine representative in the final transition from old age to new age."<sup>4</sup>

Whatever Jesus' later words about His heavenly kingship in relationship to Herod's earthly one, this very first moment of His adult ministry sets Him at odds with the people in power. John's imprisonment foreshadows Jesus' own, showcasing what happens to those who speak up about immoral leadership; John's prophetic picture of fire that burns away chaff lays the groundwork for Jesus' active work against the unjust who take advantage of their positions and of social prejudices. In this moment of and after baptism, that holy fire and the cleansing water and the dove-embodied Spirit are all simple enough ingredients that create entirely complex change. God's public claim on Jesus is a challenge, a demonstration that the Child Who was born under an auspicious star has grown into a Man Who will shake the status quo to its foundation.

This is scandalous on so, so many levels, and we who read it thousands of years later can forget that because it, like the Christmas birth, has become tame and familiar. Especially here in The United Methodist Church where baptism is a time to dress up babies and take adorable photos, it's easy to disregard the power of this declaration of allegiance. Jesus is God's now, publicly and permanently, the Son in Whom God is well pleased; He can never fade back into obscurity, not with anything approaching integrity. Yet this pivotal moment is also much about what Jesus is *going* to do; it's about what God *is doing*. We in the Methodist tradition claim this

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<sup>3</sup> [Luke 3.15-17,21-22](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Commentary on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2013

understanding of baptism: that the act has nothing to do with our work and everything to do with God's assertion that we, too, are beloved by God right now, in this moment, having done nothing at all but exist.

We who read Luke know that Jesus will do quite a bit, though, and Luke's interpolation of John's fight with Herod reminds us that accepting God's claim on Jesus' life—on *our* lives—is so much more than a nice dunking in a river. Baptism is a dare to become more, to do differently, to be changed by fire and water and Spirit. The baptismal vows of the UMC remind us that the sacred and communal moment will necessarily create change. In our baptisms, we promise for ourselves or on behalf of the baptized to “reject the evil powers of the world,” to “accept the freedom and power God gives [us] to resist evil, injustice, and oppression,” to put our “whole trust in [God's] grace,” to “serve as Christ's representatives in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

These are the kinds of things that landed John in jail; these are the kinds of promises that set Jesus on a much different path than staying in the family carpentry business would have had; these are the kinds of oaths that draw power from the incredible assertion by a voice from the heavens that there is kinship with the Most High, that there is pleasure in this connection, that the kings of the time do not have anywhere near as much power or claim over this Man—over us—as God does.

“*You are My Son,*” says God, and it is the *already*, the love before anything at all is accomplished. “With you I am well pleased,” and there are hints of the glorious burden of the *not yet*, the never-ending work that such a relationship spurs within us. It is the audacity of a man from Nazareth standing in a river in a desert and being the Christ Who would change the world.

So how are fire, water, and spirit changing *us*, church? How are we recognizing the call to become anew, to live as though God is pleased in us now, to lean into the possibilities of doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven? We have our own Herods now, to be sure, and some of us are called to be prophetic John or powerhouse Peter or cautious Thomas or steadfast James. But we all are called to recognize this moment of Jesus stepping into adulthood in a scandalous, declarative way, held by God's love now and forever, drawing strength enough to shake an empire. We all are called to remember that baptism is beautiful, and dangerous, and holy, and that Herod has power but God is the Alpha and Omega, the One Who rolls back the heavens to be present at the first steps of a new ministry. Fire, water, Spirit, change; simple enough, but oh, how complex their effects become.

May we have the faith to see God's love for us, the courage to act on God's hopes for us, and the audacity to follow God's Spirit in us. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> [Discipleship Ministries | THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT I](#)