

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

January 13, 2019
Baptism of the Lord
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Water, Wind, and Fire

Every year at this time, the lectionary of scriptural readings used by a wide ecumenical array of churches focuses our attention on the baptism of Jesus. And every year at this time, I smile as I remember the opening lines of Philip Larkin's poem entitled "Water." They go like this:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

(1964, *The Whitsun Weddings*, Faber & Faber, London, p. 20)

The poet surely knew that his idea wasn't original. Virtually all religions have a place for water in their rituals, holy writings, and practices. Think of the Hindu reverence for the River Ganges, or the wisdom in countless Indigenous traditions that water is sacred and connects all life. For Buddhists, water symbolizes purity, clarity, and calmness, and Islam teaches that water is a gift from God that should not be sold or bought. In Jesus' Jewish tradition, cleansing in ritual baths is prescribed in Torah and has been practiced for millennia. And in our Christian tradition, we have the water of baptism, the living water Jesus gives, and rivers which flow through scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

Are you thirsty yet?

How many of us have found peace on the banks of a river? How often have we been awed by God in a drenching rain, humbled by the threatening power of a flood, or refreshed by a lake's cool waters? We will hike for miles, sweating away, to see a waterfall in the back country and feel its spray on our faces. It's not that we worship water, but water elicits spirituality. Whether our response to water is humility, respect, gratitude, or joy, water connects us to spirit, and spirit to the sacred, and sacred to the divine.

The fountain we added to our worship space last fall is inspired by a verse from Romans, "God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Romans 5:5)

And indeed, Luke's account of Jesus' baptism draws attention to the gift of the Spirit which Luke tells us came down on him, like a dove descending. There was water, and there was Spirit.

It has been said that all language about God is inadequate to express the fullness of God, so we must speak in metaphor. And all our metaphors, all our symbols, merely point us toward understanding the divine. So the rich symbol of water is a sign of God which is augmented by other signs. And Luke's story adds the metaphor of wind.

The crowds gathered at the river were hopeful, expectant, eager to recognize John as God's Messiah. But John was clear. "The one who comes after me has a winnowing fork in his hand."

A winnowing fork is an ancient agricultural tool used to separate the grain from the chaff. Imagine a pile of harvested wheat. Scoop it into a shaped basket, toss the contents of the basket into the air, and let the wind blow away the chaff while the heavier grains return to the ground. Another word for Spirit is breath, or moving air—or wind. The wind from God, which moved over the face of the waters in the Genesis 1 account of creation, speaks to us of God's active work in the world. The wind from God, the Spirit, sorts the good and the bad in us, the nourishing and the useless. The wind from

God, the Spirit, comes with Christ. It is his tool and his partner, the source of his power and unity with God.

Wind, like water, is elemental for life on earth. It is the air we breathe, in motion. To borrow from Philip Larkin, "If I were called in to construct a religion, I should make use of wind." And of course, religions have always spoken of divine presence in the wind. Mythic deities are associated with the directions from which the winds come. Wind is powerful and mysterious, wonderful and frightening. In Christian scriptures, specifically in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit arrives "like the rush of a violent wind." (Acts 2:2)

And still our language isn't enough to convey the full truth of God. So our scripture adds one more classical element to the mix: Fire.

"I baptized you with water," says John, "but he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire."

If I were called in to construct a religion, I should make use of fire. Gaze on a candle's flame, gather around a bonfire, or flee from a wildfire and you'll gain a sense of why fire plays a role in ancient and modern religions. We use fire for warmth, for light, and for cooking. Fire fascinates us and frightens us, both for good reason. John's words about the Messiah are a warning, for the fire of the Holy Spirit is a purifying fire. Like the water which washes away sin, like the wind which blows away what is useless, fire clears the way for a new start. Moses experienced God in a bush that was burning without being consumed. The Hebrew people were led in the wilderness by a pillar of fire. And once again, when the book of Acts tries to describe the coming of the Holy Spirit, the rush of a violent wind is accompanied by "divided tongues, as of fire." (Acts 2:3) Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translates the mystery this way: "Like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks."

Our faith uses the everyday to approximate the eternal, the stuff of life to show us the truth of God. This is the meaning of Jesus Christ, the human one in whom dwelled the divine. In him we see that all is holy, even ordinary water. Through him we discover that God is moving among us, like the wind. Before him we bow in obedience, as his passion fills us like fire. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus was praying when the heavens opened and the Spirit descended. Prayer connects the earthly realm with the holy habitation of God, and prayer makes it possible to hear what God is saying to the world. At Jesus' baptism, God's word penetrated the hearts of those who were listening, longing for hope, saying, "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." (*The Message*) And those words, that message, is the heart of the gospel, God's good news.

For as Christ is the Human one, when we identify ourselves with his way we too hear God's affirmation of love: "You are my beloved child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." A recent survey shows that only 43% of all Americans consider religion to be an extremely important or very important part of their identity. (*The Christian Century*, 01/16/19. p. 8) Let me say again what God is saying to each of us in Christ: "You are my beloved child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." Now how would you rate the importance of religious identity in your life: not at all important, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important? God uses water, wind, and fire to tell us that we are extremely important to him. Does this message make a difference in how you identify yourself?

God speaks in water, wind, and fire, God gives us water, wind, and fire, God sends Holy Spirit for our healing and restoration to God's way. God sends Jesus so we might see and hear and touch holiness in our life, despite suffering, grief, and sin. God sends love, for God is love, and love is God's way.

Frederick Buechner writes, "To see Jesus with the heart is not only to believe in him but little by little to become bearers to each other of his healing life until we become finally healed and whole and alive within ourselves." (http://day1.org/6104-the_seeing_heart) It is by the work of the Holy Spirit that we can become vessels of Christ's healing life. All around us are people struggling to make sense of their life. Among us are people with deep pain, barely making it through each day carrying burdens of sorrow, sickness, and grief. And if in every pew there is a broken heart, think about those who haven't found their way to a pew, who live thinking they are alone in the world, and who may die without hearing of God's deep and everlasting love. Then imagine that by water, wind, and fire, by whatever means necessary, God is calling each of us with the voice of love, healing us, and empowering us to be part of his healing life.

If I were called in to construct a religion, I would make use of ordinary people,
Who would live in awe of God's extraordinary grace and truth
Who would admit to human need, their own and that of others
Who would be touched by earthly suffering enough to know our need for heavenly help

And who would pray to the God we are just beginning to know a prayer like this, written by
Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

Beloved,
Beloving,
may I be a vessel of your love today.
I am flawed and inadequate,
but you have chosen to bear your love
into the world through me.
No matter my shame or fear,
no matter the resistance of others,
let your love shine in me.
To all, the intimate and the stranger,
ally and enemy, welcoming and bristly,
let me convey your love,
for their sake (which is your sake),
not my own.
Not my own skinny passion,
but your deep, life-giving love
flows through me each moment.
May I fill to overflowing
with you
for the sake of the world.
Amen.

(Steve Garnaas-Holmes, <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections?month=August-2018>)