

1-9-22 St. Peter Lutheran Church, Doss, TX

Luke 3:15 Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.” ¹⁸ John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people. ¹⁹ John also publicly criticized Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for marrying Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for many other wrongs he had done. ²⁰ So Herod put John in prison, adding this sin to his many others.

²¹ One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized. As he was praying, the heavens opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.

With our second lesson and Gospel, today we focus on baptism. Specifically, Paul wrote: (Romans) 6:1 *Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? 2 Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? 3 Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? 4 For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

Most of us here are baptized. My baptismal anniversary is next week on January 13. Baptism has been mistaken to be a divine insurance policy and it is not. Jesus said, “¹⁶ Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.” Belief is the key and the baptism is a sign of that belief.

This is what Martin Luther said about baptism. “Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word.” He backs that up with Matthew 28’s Great Commission: “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” (Matt. 28:19)

He goes on to say that the benefits of Baptism are that “It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.”

Then he asks the question, “How can water do such great things?” His answer is: “Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God with the water. For without God’s Word, the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the Word of God, it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul says in Titus, chapter three: “*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying.*” (Titus 3:5–8)”

Finally, Luther asks, "What does such baptizing with water indicate?" He answers, "It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." He then quotes from our second lesson for today from Romans 6.

In Matthew 3, John the Baptist responds to Jesus' request for baptism. *13 Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to talk him out of it. "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you," he said, "so why are you coming to me?" 15 But Jesus said, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires." So, John agreed to baptize him.*

In our Gospel for today, John says, "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire,*" speaking about Jesus. What does that mean? This doesn't mean that water is not the earthly element in baptism whether in sprinkling or immersion. But John's baptism was a baptism of repentance and Jesus' baptism is of the Holy Spirit. He said to the disciples about Pentecost in Acts 1, "*He (God) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*" *John the Baptist in our Gospel for today says the same thing about Jesus. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."*

In baptism, we are given a gift of the Holy Spirit to build up the Kingdom of God. Paul speaks of that in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. But what is this "fire" about? Lenski, in his commentary, says it has to do with the purging of sin. It is an image of purification.

One song writer, Meredith Andrews, wrote a song called, "Burn Away." Listen to the words. 1) "Only You, only You, All I need, let nothing stand In between, make me Yours, Consuming Fire ... Burn away everything that breaks Your heart, everything that is not love, purify my every thought.

Take away everything that comes between us, everything that is untrue. Jesus, make me more like You. Burn away.

2) You are love, You are love, Blazing Light, holy flame, fierce and wild, have Your way, Consuming fire. Make me holy, as You are holy, refine me in your fire, oh God. Make me holy, as You are holy. in my life be glorified," Consuming Fire.

You might ask how a baby being baptized would be purged or refined by the Holy Spirit's fire and the traditional answer is the washing away of original sin. But then, as we grow in years, we sin, repent, are forgiven and it repeats itself. Where is the refining fire? It is what is called, 'sanctification,' or in the process of being made holy by the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. The song, "Burn Away," indicates that getting to know God better and better over time has the consequence of wanting to be made holy and have sin burned out of our lives. The songwriter says, "Burn away everything that breaks Your heart."

But what about when we lose our way? He is there with us and calls us home. Twyla Paris, in a song called, "True North" says: "We lost our bearings following our own mind. We left conviction behind. Fear of the future, springing from sins of the past, hiding the hope that would last. How did we ever wander so far and where do we go from here? How will we know where it is? True north. There's a strong steady light that is guiding us home, True north, in the lingering night we were never alone. True North."

Let's look at what it means to be sanctified. Sanctifying means to make holy. Sanctifying is that journey toward wholeness that is made possible by the working of the Holy Spirit. God says to you and me: grow in My grace. We are equipped by the Holy Spirit for acts of servant-hood in the world, but those acts of love and care can only be done through the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Paul said to the Galatians in chapter 2 (20): *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.* Jesus said He sent the Holy Spirit for comforting, convicting of sin, and about what's right, to guide us into the way of all truth, and to help us pray.

Sanctifying grace is the work of the Holy Spirit restoring us to the image of God that we were created in. Through the God's Spirit, He empowers us for a life of grace. We see how God empowers us as we experience his love, grace, and healing in our lives.

Let me illustrate that with a story by Walter Wangerin. I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Even before the dawn one Friday morning, I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking on the alleys of our city. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice: "Rags!" "Now, this is a wonder," I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashing intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a Ragman in the inner city? I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed. Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking. The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers. "Give me your rag," he said so gently, "and I'll give you another." He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver. Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear. "This is a wonder," I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery. "Rags! Rags! New rags for old!" In a little while, when the sky showed gray behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out of black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, and whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek. Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart. "Give me your rag and I'll give you mine." The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood-his own! "Rags! Rags! I take old rags!" cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry. 'Are you going to work?' he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: "Do you have a job?" 'Are you crazy?' sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket-flat the cuff stuffed into the

pocket. He had no arm. "So," said the Ragman. "Give me your jacket and I'll give you mine." Such quiet authority in his voice! The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman-and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one. "Go to work," he said. After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it around himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes. And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman.

Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, failing again and again, exhausted, old, old and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs, he skittered through the alleys of the city, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond. I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I needed to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little old Ragman came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And then I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor, he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket and he died. Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know, how could I know that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night too? But then, on Sunday morning, I was awakened by a violence. Light - pure, hard, demanding light-slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the last and the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow nor of age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness. Well, then I lowered my head and trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with a dear yearning in my voice: "Dress me." He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!"

Sanctification is like the re-clothing of the man in the story. The Sunday after Christmas, my text was from Colossians 3 that began, "*Since God chose you to be the holy people He loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*"

When you consider your own baptism, celebrate that day. Put it on your calendar and then ask how you are doing in allowing God to sanctify your life. How you can be open to His leading for every tomorrow. I had a cancer removed from my ear a week ago Thursday. Every day, it hurt and I didn't want to bump it. But I'm glad it's gone and I'm better off without it. So, it goes with anything in our lives that needs to be 'burned away.' It hurts, but we're better off without it.

May God in Christ bless you with the joy of your own baptism and how He has led and sanctified you through the years and will continue to do so. Amen