FIRE AND WATER  
Scripture: Luke 3:15-22

FOCUS: Baptism is about more than joining a church, it is about being washed clean and being born again, about new beginnings.

Fire and water. What images do they bring to mind? In recent days water has been the source of devastation and displacement for many around here. And the mention of fire revives uncomfortable memories of the same for all of us. For me there is the surreal feeling in the pit of my stomach when Krissy called me in in North Carolina, in the middle of that May night saying, “The church is burning!” As I began to hear stories of flooding in Elba recently I remembered what it was like back in ’92 when Kathy and I went with a group from Covenant to help clean up after that devastating flood. It was unnerving to enter a declared disaster zone, to be told to report to city hall there to receive a mandatory tetanus shot. We were then offered food from a Red Cross van. We didn’t need it because we would be going home to a dry, comfortable home for supper. But there were many folks then as now who were sleeping in shelters and didn’t know what they would do to get their lives back together.

Fire and water are destructive, ugly and unwelcomed. But not always. One of the web based music sources I use is Calm Radio. Lynn Nesbitt introduced it to me as a good alternative for background music. It offers scores of channels and was originally marketed as just what the name implies. I was interested to note the other day that they have apparently given in to the reality that there are not enough folks who want calm music all the time to fully support their efforts. The most recent additions to their lineup are included in a “pop rock” category and off such channels as “Rock Explosion”, Classic Soul and rock music from each of the last three decades of the twentieth century. I like most of them, but calm they are not. I think that says something about the age we live in, calm is not what we pursue most of the time, to our detriment.

But once again, I digress. Among the older channels there is a whole section called “atmospheres”. It really is calming, offering several calming background sounds you can stream alone or ad to the music channels. One of my favorites is “stream” which provides the quiet, calming sounds of a small mountain brook. When I hear that sound my mind goes to the stream which ran by our families log house in the mountains and to the peace I often found there. Then there is the sound of the Gulf’s surf on a quiet summer’s evening. Who doesn’t love that? After an active day at the beach there is just something calming about that sound once the crowds have retired back to their rooms. Water can be peaceful, soothing and restorative.

Some of you know that one of the things I most wanted in our retirement home was a fireplace. Now let me make one thing perfectly clear. Those places in the wall with gas logs, they are not fireplaces! A fireplace is where you burn real wood, where you get to poke around and add logs. Real fireplaces are, at least for me, a calming source of entertainment. Most of us have at some time, gathered around a campfire, there to share comradery, to be warmed by the controlled burn. There to be calmed and renewed. There is just something captivating and soothing about a contained fire. The flickering flames, the warmth, the smoke and the crackling of wood being transformed into ash.

Fire and water. What interesting symbols for the dual baptisms to which we are, both literally and figuratively, called. God knew exactly what God was doing when baptism incorporated these two richly complex forces. As we have all discovered over the years, the Christian faith is a complex journey. The same faith which promises a joyful and abundant life, calls for the taking up of a cross. We are called to lose our lives in order to save them. To a world obsessed with success and self-gratification the gospel proclaims the almost incomprehensible notion that the first will be last and the last first. That just doesn’t sound right does it? How can that be?

Tomorrow there is a football game which will garner the interest of a number of us. It is interesting that even before the final game for the season has begun there are preliminary projections for next year. We all want to see our teams high on the list. The one list I looked at had Alabama number one. Now I know these early lists are basically meaningless, but that doesn’t mean we don’t take pride in the possibility. We fans don’t see the report and think, “Oh man, what a bummer I sure wish we were at the bottom of the list.” And few followers of those teams who were not ranked will find that to be cause for celebration. We just don’t live in a world where coming in last is celebrated. We are a people who like to win, who are proud when we do.

Jesus turns that attitude on its head. It is a bit like the matter of water and fire. It is all a matter of perspective and context. Jesus isn’t calling for us to all to become losers. Notice he doesn’t speak of winners and losers, he speaks of first and last. What he is doing is pushing us toward a new way of looking at things, for a deeper understanding of context and a new perspective on life. I’m reminded of Alice and Wonderland who wondered if, she were to fall through the center of the earth, would she walk upside down once coming out the other side. We determined in the children’s moment that would not be the case.

Well that is a bit like what Jesus is saying. We all know that the earth doesn’t have the kind of upside and downside Alice was envisioning. It is simply a matter of perspective. No matter where we find ourselves on this odd ball we call home, we stand upright. But we can see how Alice might think that on the opposite side of the globe we would walk upside down. So it is when it comes to being first or last. Jesus is calling for a change of perspective. He is showing us that, as his people, we are those living on the other side of the globe, so to speak. And for those bound, as was Alice, to the status quo and familiar perspectives, it may well appear that we are upside down.

With that in mind let us look more closely again at this water and fire baptism thing. Water baptism was nothing new in Jesus’ day. Jews had long practiced baptism as a traditional act of purification and as a rite of cleansing for converts to Judaism. Ancient cults had similar rituals. The baptism which John practiced would have been familiar to Jews and Gentiles alike as an act of repentance and a symbol of sins forgiven. Notice that John does not say that his baptism is not important. He continues to baptize people and even baptizes Jesus. He just says it isn’t enough.

Repentance and the forgiveness of sin. Both are of fundamental importance for true disciples of Jesus Christ. Water baptism is a powerful symbolic act. Here we baptize with water sprinkled from a bowl. Some traditions baptize by pouring from a pitcher, others by immersion. The United Methodist Church recognizes all three. There is common symbolism in them all.

First is the notion of cleansing. That was the focus of John’s baptism. It is where we must begin as we seek to become fully integrated into the kingdom of God. We begin by honestly confronting our sin and then moving forward, seeking to leave it behind. That is not to say we will forever be rid of our brokenness. We all know that is not the case. And that is why grace is so important. That is why we must never take for granted the enormity of the sacrifice Jesus made for us.

I am reminded of the gospel song by the Edwin Hawkins singers from the mid-sixties which became a pop hit. Do you remember “Oh Happy Day?” the words are, in part,

Oh happy day (oh happy day)  
Oh happy day (oh happy day)  
When Jesus washed (when Jesus washed)  
When Jesus washed (when Jesus washed)  
When Jesus washed (when Jesus washed)  
He washed my sins away (oh happy day)  
Oh happy day (oh happy day)

He taught me how to watch, fight and pray, fight and pray  
And live rejoicing every, everyday

Oh happy day

Powerful words. Once we accept the cleansing of baptism, and recognize it as a gift of grace, not the product of any effort on our part, we are prepared to be about the hard work of becoming new creatures, set apart from the things of this world. We begin to live into the second notion of water baptism, new life. And like water itself which can be at times destructive and frightening and at times soothing and inviting, this baptism into new life bring both joys and challenges.

In our Methodist tradition we honor and celebrate new mortal life by baptizing infants. Those innocent young souls have not accumulated much messiness, at least not the conscious adult kind, from which to be cleansed. But we all know that the innocence will be short lived. So as we rejoice over the miracle of new life in our midst we are reminded by the sacrament of the responsibility which is ours as a family of faith to nurture and encourage the children on their journey toward full discipleship. After I baptize an infant I always ask you ***“Will you endeavor so to live that this child may grow in the knowledge and love of God through our Savior Jesus Christ?”*** And then we all respond ***“With God’s help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.”***

We as a congregation have a heavy responsibility and we have made a serious pledge as a part of the sacrament administered to each child. The moment is as important for us as it is for the child. One day that innocent life will have lost its innocence and how well we have carried out our familial responsibility will impact the direction that maturing life will take. We have a responsibility to each other to be about encouraging, challenging and nurturing, especially the youngest among us.

But ultimately it will be up to each individual to accept or reject a different kind of new life, one initiated by that second birth of which Jesus spoke. Once innocence has been lost, and we all lose it, once we become tainted by such sins as pride, selfishness, anger, and the lot, we become responsible for our own rebirth. And we need that cleansing that comes only as we accept the ransom which was paid for us by Christ. It is like going through a death and resurrection. That is the symbolism of immersion baptism. Similarly adult baptism by pouring or sprinkling, which is usually associated with a profession of faith and confirmation into full membership of the church, points to this new birth.

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus. It was a water baptism, John’s baptism. It just makes no sense. Why would Jesus need baptism? It was obviously a question on John’s mind as well. In Matthew’s gospel he objects when Jesus comes for baptism, says he needs to be baptized by Jesus, and in some ways he was right on target there. More about that in a moment. But Jesus insists and the result is the dramatic scene of the Holy Spirit coming down and enveloping him. Jesus didn’t have to be cleansed of sin, but he understood the importance of being obedient and of setting an example. That was how he would carry out his ministry, by example. And I think it was important for Jesus to have that moment as the commencement of his ministry, the affirmation that as he moved forward God’s spirit would surround him through the calm waters and through the storms.

John tells us that Jesus is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. That is a pretty good analogy for the way the Spirit has moved in my life. I have been both calmed and terrified by its presence. I have been both gently warmed and completely consumed by the Spirit’s power. And that is as it should be. The Spirit is an awesome presence which calls for a response.

I suspect that many of you, like me, have heard verse 17 used as a call to repentance for all those bad and horrible sinners out there. Well it is that to be sure. In The Message John says, ***“I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”***

So as we gather our thoughts about baptism I leave you with this thought. What if we all took Peterson’s paraphrase to heart? Instead of seeing in the words about winnowing and burning a condemnation of others about which to be smug, may we see it as a call to allow God to burn up all the stuff within us which is nothing more than useless chaff. Then as we live into the new life of our second births, as we are gathered up with all the saints for service and communion through the awesome power of the Spirit with the Father and the Son, we will live rejoicing every day, Oh happy day! For your sake for the sake of a world in need of more water and fire and for the sake of the Spirit who brings them both, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN