

## **Baptism, By Fire**

Psalm 29, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Center Church, Hartford, CT

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*(Sets candles in Baptismal water and lights them)*

John told the people that Jesus would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...he will gather the wheat into the granary but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So, do you think maybe we have tamed the baptism thing a little? We've made it into this sweet ritual where we bring a baby all dressed in white and put a little water on its head and welcome it into our community. It's lovely, but it doesn't look anything like what John said Jesus would do. I actually kind of like it when a baby cries out at the water, because I wonder if, somehow, they deeply understand the commitment that is being made here!

Now let's be clear, the gospels tell zero stories of Jesus baptizing anyone. Ever. In Matthew's gospel, though, Jesus' last words to the disciples included instructions to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...” And shortly after that, his disciples got baptized by fire on Pentecost, meaning their lives got turned around and they got “fired up,” so to speak, for the work Jesus gave them of teaching and healing and radically loving.

But we have doused the fire in our baptismal rituals. We have ignored altogether this bit about Jesus separating wheat from chaff, partly because most of us these days who do not live on farms have absolutely no idea what that means. We think maybe it means separating good people from bad people, like building a wall or something.

But it doesn't. Each grain on a stalk of wheat is covered by chaff. In order to get to the usable grain so you can make flour to make bread or cereal or whatever, you have to get rid of the chaff. It's like husking sweet corn when you get it from a farmer's market. The chaff is the stuff that gets in the way of what's important for life.

Each of us has chaff Jesus wants to help us shed.

The chaff is the stuff that gets in the way of what's important for life. The fire to which John refers is a cleansing fire, like the fire used to burn away impurities in metal or to heat glass so it can be shaped into dishes or bowls.

Baptism is not just about becoming part of the community of the faithful. It is about making a promise that we will let God help us get rid of whatever is in the way so we can fully live our lives as disciples. It's like this thing about purging your stuff a la the Kondo method of looking at everything and getting rid of whatever doesn't bring you joy. Except we get rid of whatever gets in the way of us bringing God joy and allowing us to live in love as Christ has loved us, which ultimately will bring us the great joy promised by the Christmas angels.

And God means for us to do this rather energetically. Fire! Shaking the wheat to remove the chaff. Our baptismal promises tell us this. One of them reads: "Do you renounce the powers of evil?" We're not just supposed to say, "Sure," but we are supposed to then, as baptized people, let God work energetically with us to remove barriers, large and small, in order to keep us away from any power that is not God.

It's a new year, a good time to revisit our Baptismal promises and the **power** of the Holy Spirit that we re-invite into our lives every time we renew those vows. This year, I invite us to focus on that baptismal promise of renouncing evil or chaff or anything that gets in the way of us bearing fruit, loving and serving God. And I want to give you another image to help us.

Our family likes to go to a farm and cut a live Christmas Tree every year in December. At the farm in Hamden we've gone to for 12 years now, we cut the tree and bring it back to the barn where a helper sets the tree up on top of a small round machine. He holds the tree and turns on the machine and the tree shakes. Straw and random stuff that has blown into the tree over the years of its growth shake out so that we don't bring that stuff into the house.

When I read the Psalm for today, I thought of that experience. "The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness." In the Narnia stories, C.S. Lewis says again and again that God is not tame.

It occurred to me that maybe we need to shake ourselves up this morning as we renew our baptisms. To shake away the chaff. What is it for you? I know for me it is things like busyness, often doing things that I really don't need to be doing. It is also a tendency to despair, to not believing things in the world will ever be just or loving. It is fear. Fear. It is discovering that how I prioritize my time is not really in line with God's priorities for me, because I have not spent time in prayer seeking God's priorities for me.

And that's just a start.

If we are brutally honest with ourselves, what is getting in the way of loving and serving God and our neighbors and ourselves with all our heart, mind, and strength? Is it stuff or the desire for stuff? Desire for whatever "success" means? The need to be liked? Not loving ourselves? Easy acceptance of how others put us down? Neglect of our relationship with God in worship and prayer?

What is it that you need to, in the words of a Taylor Swift song, "Shake it off!"

"Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play  
And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate  
Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake  
I shake it off, I shake it off  
Heartbreakers gonna break, break, break, break, break  
And the fakers gonna fake, fake, fake, fake, fake  
Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake  
I shake it off, I shake it off  
I shake it off, I shake it off"

Friends, we are going to shake some of it off right now. I invite those who are able to stand. Let's take a moment in silence and I ask you to think of one thing about your life that you need to shake off so that you can renounce whatever power is holding you down from claiming the freedom of new life in Christ.

*Silence*

Now, breathe deeply, and, literally, let's shake it off!

Go ahead, shake your body. And your mind. And your spirit!

The laughter is good, it is the seed of the greater joy that we can claim in Jesus. When you go home, do some more soul-searching and self-shaking. If we are to fulfill another of those baptismal promises, we need to keep shaking until we are clear of the chaff. We promised this: "Do you promise, by the grace of God, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?" The response is: "I promise, with the help of God." If you can, say it with me, "I promise, with the help of God." Just remember that God's help sometimes means shaking us up. Amen.