

2025 1st after Epiphany Baptism of our Lord

I have read that passage from the Gospel who-knows-how-many times over the past 23 years. Never has the fire imagery bothered me as much as it does today.

I suppose that is, in part, because I'm thinking of Linda and Pete Caradonna, preparing to leave here and fly to their new home in California on Wednesday. I have checked in with her. As of the time of writing this sermon, their new home is not in the danger zone. But I am still troubled by *these* fires in a way I have never been by any that came before.

There is something about knowing a loved one is in the path of that danger that elicits a stronger response. It's probably part of our evolution as human beings. It's human nature to have a deeper emotional response to something when it impacts someone close to you. When it's video of strangers on the screen, we feel compassion for the victims. We might even feel a pull to do something to help—to write a check or share resources. At the very least, to pray for them. But when it's your loved one, it goes deeper.

On Christmas Eve, I tried to communicate an idea that has been rattling around in my brain over the past few months. I was trying to say that in the Incarnation, heaven and earth met and joined and walked the earth. God was declaring that humankind was no longer the

“other.” There was no longer a clear dividing line between “holy” and “human.” Every person on the planet becomes a loved one for whom the Divine would walk through fire to save. And if God will not “other” any single one of us, perhaps we shouldn’t be quite so quick to divide people into “us” and “them.” That we are all “God’s”—even those who don’t want to belong.

I am not sure anyone understood my point—mostly because I wasn’t doing a very good job of articulating it. So I’m going to try again, coming at it from a different story from the Gospel of Luke.

I suspect many of you have this image in your mind when you think of the baptism of Jesus. Jesus and John alone in the Jordan River, maybe a crowd of people on the banks, looking on in wonder. There is a kind of slash in the sky above, a bright light shining down on them. A dove flying toward Jesus (sometimes it even looks a little like it’s dive-bombing him). To paraphrase Peter Bickford’s comment on Wednesday, “It makes for great art.” We can almost hear the voice of God reverberating out of that visual image, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased.”

But is that what we heard in this passage from Luke today? No.

In Luke’s Gospel, we are offered an image of Jesus being one of a whole crowd of people who were baptized that

day, and it was only after everyone was wet that God spoke up. Jesus is baptized with all those other people, one of the crowd. Not somebody “other.”

Now sure, then comes all the drama, the heavens being rolled back and the dove and the voice...

But he is still in a crowd of people. He’s not standing alone, not standing apart. Maybe that’s the point Luke is trying to make. Even at the beginning, he was not something different. Something other.

He was one of us.

Since I first started looking at these readings last week, the question keeps coming back to me: what made Jesus go down to the Jordan River *that* day? What voice had already been speaking to him in the silence of his heart, urging him to go? I suspect this was not the first time Jesus felt like he was being dive-bombed by the Holy Spirit. What was different this time?

I don’t have an answer. I’m not even entirely sure it’s a relevant question. But it keeps coming back to me.

After 30 years of walking this earth, *why that day?*

Maybe it’s because next week is the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, but this reminds me of a morning when I, too, was 30 years old. I had spent months and years of fighting against the sense that God

was calling me to be a priest. I was already in seminary but was not yet convinced I was called to the priesthood. I had spent time in a peer group wrestling with the question with no clear direction. And then one morning, I woke up, and just knew. I still hear the professor who facilitated that group asking me the question I have been spending this week asking Jesus. What changed? What was different about this morning? Why now?

How did the voice of God finally break through all the barriers I had set up against it?

I had no answer for her question then. I have no answer for it now. I just know that one morning I woke up and the voice of God had burned away all my noes and not-yets, so that all I had left to say was Yes.

Today's psalm is all about the power of the voice of God.

The voice of God hovers over the waters, speaking creation into existence like thunder. The voice of God is a voice of power and splendor...it breaks down the mightiest trees and shakes the wilderness, making mountains and hills "skip" like a calf...it makes the oak trees writhe and strips the forest bare...

It splits the flames of fire.

And here we are, back where we began. Fire.

That uncontrollable force that can change everything in an instant. The fire that consumes indiscriminately. Fire that doesn't distinguish between a ramshackle falling down hovel and a multi-million dollar mansion. Fire, the great leveler.

No wonder one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit is fire. Fire doesn't "other."

I am hesitant to bring the name of God too close to the flames that are consuming parts of California right now. There will be too many people trying to make sense of this catastrophe, by saying that God somehow *wanted* the horror and destruction left in its wake. I do not believe that. Not for a second. These fires are not God's will or part of some larger plan. They are a tragic combination of natural forces and the consequences of climate change.

But that doesn't mean that God is absent from the whole mess. Even in the midst of it, if we listen carefully, we can hear God's voice.

In the person whose entire family made it to safety and can look back at what they lost and recognize that what they lost were things.

In the person who put their own life on the line to help someone else to safety.

In the person who heard in the roaring cacophony of wind and flames the very voice of God calling to them, “Do not fear!...I have called you by name, you are mine.”

God is speaking to us in and through every moment of our lives.

Let’s go back to that morning on the River Jordan for just one more minute. Jesus stands on the river bank, in a crowd of people, all of them dripping wet and praying. And a voice says, “You are my beloved. With you I am well-pleased.”

What if the voice was saying that not just to Jesus, but to every single one of them standing there? Calling each one of them into renewed relationship with God? Into a life unshackled by fear? Into a life of service driven by the commitment to love one’s neighbor?

How do you hear the voice of God? In the roaring of the wind? In a splashing of a river being fed by melting snow? In the quiet of the night? In the noise of a busy city street? In the out-of-nowhere but persistent urge to reach out to an old friend? In the sudden spasm of compassion for a complete stranger?

In that tiny whispering voice that challenges you to hear and believe that you—YOU—are God’s beloved child, in whom God is well pleased?

And how do you respond? Amen.