

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Some of us were probably filled with expectation. While in Israel more than a decade ago, our group had been given permission and the opportunity to visit what recent excavations showed to be the most ancient site where Christians had gathered to commemorate John the Baptizer...*and* the baptism of Jesus.

Another site, far to the north, had long been popularized by the Israeli government because it was along a short stretch of the Jordan River that was bordered on both sides by the state of Israel. To be honest, that site was far too commercialized for my tastes, and was just plain upsetting for me. It contained niches of steps so that excited Christian pilgrims could descend into the Jordan River and then willingly submit to one of the most ancient of Christian heresies – rebaptism. On this latest trip to Israel I had explained to our relieved guide why I wanted to skip that awful baptismal site, and go to a winery instead!

But now had come the unexpected chance to visit this more ancient and probably far more accurate site of John's baptismal ministry and Jesus' baptism. Although visitor facilities were still under construction, our driver Siam had somehow gotten permission for us to visit the site on the banks of the Jordan River. So he drove us out...into the Judean wilderness, let me tell you. It was certainly a desert and rather desolate location. Authorities had to actually sweep the place for landmines to be removed. We couldn't help but wonder about what spirit had led so many people to leave city or village, and then to traverse this desert wilderness full of dangers criminal and climatic, to arrive at the banks of the Jordan River, which like a watery knife sliced through this wilderness.

The bus stopped and we stepped out to walk past facilities still under construction, but already looking like the shops of commercialism on its way here too. We came to the end of the soon-to-be shopping plaza, and could descend steps to the Jordan River, where I noticed something very akin to one of those niches for heretical

rebaptisms. But none of that held one's attention for long. No, we all descended to the waters' edge and beheld the River Jordan. The river here, as in the north, was not all that wide: only 10 yards across. But the river here looked much different than it did farther north. Some of us gawked at the Jordon River: it was so...muddy and foul-looking! We could not imagine what spirit would have ever led people to let themselves wade into something as dirty and murky and...yucky as this big...mud puddle! Some of us would stick a finger or a hand in it, just to be able to tell friends back home that we had touched the waters of the Jordon. But I can tell you, there was no temptation whatsoever for anyone to wade into that muddy mess for any rebaptism!

We were to hold a short service of affirmation of baptism; and I didn't know quite what to do. How could one sense or celebrate anything sublime in a river so...nasty-looking? But suddenly the site again captured more of our attention than did the waters. 10 yards away, on the other side, was Jordon, not the river but the country. And over on that Jordanian side was an Orthodox Church built close to the banks of the river. And in a pavilion down the bank from the church and just above the river, priest, worshippers, and a family had all gathered for...a baptism! We all found ourselves watching the event. The baby was not dipped into the river, much to our relief; but into a large Orthodox font, whose waters if from the Jordon River, we all hoped had been filtered if not also boiled. As our reaffirmation of baptism concluded on this side, and their baptism on that side, we Christians from the West waved in congratulations; and those Christians from the East waved back in their joy and pride. Suddenly the dirtied river water that had divided us, now strangely united us in...one Lord, one faith, one baptism. [In the narthex I'll share some pictures, so that you can get a better idea of the strange effects this place could have.]

Well, here we are at the edge of a new year. And its waters seem murky, don't they? ...The mood foul, the flow of possibility rather stagnant, and its prospects muddied. The expectation that normally fills us as we approached the New Year is evolving into unsettled disappointment. We're in the middle of another Covid surge, and resent having to backtrack to precautions we thought we could at least leave behind. The economic recovery is still so fragile...and inflation greets us during every visit to the grocery store. In Congress – well, the drama, if not *Sturm und Drang*, of stalemate continues to frustrate us. And then there are some of us who are getting sick and tired of being so chronically sick and tired. A few have probably had it.

Well, if anyone sounds like someone who's had it, it would be John the Baptizer. There he is, standing at the edge of the Jordan, and warning of a messiah of judgment: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the

wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” John’s mood is like the wilderness, harsh and desolate; his voice is like the desert wind, hot and strident; and his vision is like the sand storm, swirling and threatening.

But another person also stands at the edge of the Jordan. How can one sense anything sublime by waters so murky and muddied? And then wonder of wonders, this person wades into those waters! We could only stand at the edge and wonder what spirit could have possibly led anyone to wade out into those murky waters. But *Jesus* wades into them...and lets John bathe him in the all but stagnant waters of possibility, so muddied and dirtied by our polluted times. And in a place where it’s so hard to sense anything sublime at all, he prays...perhaps while still in those waters. He prays in that murky stream of our hopes and fears. And suddenly a sight captures more of his attention than did the river! Bright, white, and pristine, it descends all around him and upon him. At first like a dove, but then it’s like a someone *from that other shore* is all around him and holding him still dripping with that yucky river water. And there is no disappointment or anger, no strident threat or frustrated railing. There is only the voice of this Father, so filled with joy and pride: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Down by the Jordan, a wave of Spirit! And suddenly the dirty river water that had divided now unites messy mortal with sublime Divinity.

Despite all the reasons to be pessimistic about the future and resigned to the world’s failings, Jesus has Spirit! Jesus has Holy Spirit to get going, to help, to heal – Holy Spirit to speak out, to call others to the cause, to engage the world of need! Still soaking with those dirtied waters, Jesus experiences God’s profound change from “the chaff burning with unquenchable fire” to “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ...The profound move from terrible gloom to terrific grace, from “the end is at hand” to “the hand that heals,” from the fire of judgment to the waters of...new life! Still soaking with the waters of that unlikely baptism, Jesus now realizes that the Messiah’s unquenchable fire is not terror’s torching of the world God so loved that God gave...but instead it’s love’s stubborn flame to warm a cold world and to brighten the dark times. Just as the complacent and self-righteous are rightly confronted with John’s fiery warning of God’s judgment, so the despondent and hurting are longing for Jesus’ shining Spirit of God’s grace in time of need.

I know the times are uncertain; I know that for many the new year has begun with pain, worry, and mortal fears; I know it can be hard to hope and easy to despair. But I know Jesus’ experience of his baptism is the Gospel promise of the Spirit at work in our baptism. “You are my Child, the One I love. I’m so happy you are mine.” That was not Jesus’ reward or congratulations for a job well done. Read Luke’s Gospel.

Jesus hadn't done anything yet. He hadn't even started his ministry or even entered the fray. This was not Jesus reward for having done so well; it was the sheer gift of God's love to "*spirit*" him into doing well, into doing the good...and the relentlessly compassionate, and stubbornly right.

"You are my Child, the One I love. I'm so happy you are mine." It may not have been in the Jordon's waters, but that's still God's Word in the waters of your baptism into Christ. The Baptism of our Lord... All is not light, but there is still a Light shining in the darkness for you and me, and the darkness has. Not overcome it! All is not hopeful, but there is now among us the Promised One to raise all our hopes! All is not full of good cheer, but there is now a Grace full of goodness to cheer us on. All is not a sea of bliss, but there is a Stream of Mercy flowing now in the wilderness of our times. All is not the good life, but there is now a Life risen from death that will make good all our losses. At the baptism of our Lord, the outpouring of grace: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And what's left is...Holy Spirit resting, remaining, and reigning upon Jesus, and all baptized into Him. Brothers and sisters, it's time to wade into those murky waters, not of the Jordon, but of our times. There's ministry to be done. And God has given the Spirit!