

Rise, Children of the Kingdom

Luke 3:7-18

by Michael G. Lilienthal

“You brood of vipers!”

That’s how John greeted the crowds that came out to be baptized by him. I asked you before¹ how much insulting from the pulpit you’d take before you walked out. Now, strictly speaking, John wasn’t just insulting the people. He was calling out hypocrisy, especially as it was manifested among the Pharisees and Sadducees. In Matthew’s Gospel account, he records that John uttered this shout “when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism” (Matt. 3:7). You’ll remember these two groups as some of the principle antagonists in Jesus’ ministry, those who sought to convict the Son of God of blasphemy, who rejected his spiritual understanding of the Law and rather sought to keep it themselves by going through the motions of various works. John is proclaiming the very same thing Jesus would preach, as he cites the prophet Isaiah:

This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.
(Matt. 15:8-9)

John and Jesus both teach a true repentance and true worship — and Paul preaches the same thing: “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency

¹ Advent 2 (12/6/15).

is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:4-6).

Therefore John the Baptist can be said to be "a lightning rod that separates Israel into two groups: those faithfully waiting for the Messiah, and those who have created for themselves something they believe is an alternative means of salvation, something from which they are not willing to *turn* in repentance."² John's baptism was one of preparation, calling people to turn away from their false ways and toward the true repentance and forgiveness of sins, warning of the fire that was to come. The King was coming, and he was going to baptize "with the Holy Spirit and with fire," but this meant good things for those whose worship and repentance was true: therefore John's call is to **rise, children of the kingdom**.

I. For Baptism with Fire

John's speaking of Jesus' baptism with fire has seemed cryptic for centuries. Jesus himself echoes the statement later on, after his resurrection saying to his disciples, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5).

According to ancient science, there were four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Water and fire stood in direct opposition to one another, as combative elements. John was drawing a sharp distinction between the two types of baptism: they were wildly different! John's baptism with water marked purity, washing, cleaning. When people

² Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 138, italics original.

entered a house, the servants of the host would wash the feet of the visitors with water. This accomplished two things: 1) the weary feet of the travelers were given rest; 2) the house of the host would not be muddied by the dirt of the roads. In the same way, John, as servant of the Messiah and God, through the washing of baptism pronounced forgiveness of sins — rest for souls — to those he washed, and those who were washed and brought into the realm of the kingdom were cleaned of the dirt of the world — of sin.

Take the hypothetical case of one who was baptized by John, never met Jesus or heard of him, and died before Jesus came into the public light. Would that person go to heaven? Assuming that he never departed from the forgiveness given in John's baptism and maintained faith in the Messiah to whom John pointed, yes, that person was saved. So what makes John's baptism "with water" different from Jesus' baptism "with the Holy Spirit and with fire"?

John goes on and describes the Messiah, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." When wheat was harvested from the fields, it was brought into a threshing floor where the good parts were separated from the useless parts, and all left on the ground. The winnowing fork lifted the good parts out and tossed them into the carts to go into the barns, while the useless parts were still left. Then those useless parts, the "chaff" or "stubble" (Mal. 4:1) are swept into fire to be burned.

Picture the wheat and the tares — the weeds or tares grew up alongside the good wheat, and were left until the Judgment, when all were collected: "the weeds...in

bundles to be burned, but...the wheat into my barn" (Matt. 13:30). The fire, we see, is the agent of purging; it eliminates the evil, the useless, the problematic. And yet, Luke tells us, "So with many other exhortations [John] preached *good news* to the people."

This fire is part of the "good news"! Of course, as part of the watershed dividing the good from the bad, it is good for those who are good – but how can one be sure of being good? It is not by saying, "We have Abraham as our father," or claiming any other merit or goodness of yourself. We can go through the practices John advises: "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance," examples of which include, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Be charitable. Give whenever you're able. Now you're on the right track. Also, if you work as a tax collector, or deal with money, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Be fair, do not steal or deal falsely. If you work in military or law enforcement, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." Don't abuse your power, don't terrorize people, don't slander, learn to be content.

All these things should sound familiar, to the Jews who first heard John and to you and me now: all of these relate to the Ten Commandments, especially the second table, which is summarized: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Think of the Pharisees again. They would be quick to claim, "I've kept the commandments! I've done it all!" Typically, however, their keeping of the commandments was just going through the motions. They saw commandments like, "You shall not kill," and asked the question, "How far am I allowed to go before my act

is considered killing?" They saw commandments like, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy," and asked the question, "How much am I allowed to do before it is considered 'work'?" These were the wrong questions. These questions led to equivocation, finding loopholes. It's the same as how children will be told, "Don't touch your sister," and so they'll touch her shirt or her shoe and claim, "I'm not touching you!" Strictly speaking, they have kept the *letter* of the command. But they have not kept the *spirit*. By the very act of seeking out loopholes, they have disobeyed the *spirit* of the command. So rather than ask, "How much can I get away with?" the proper question is, as these people in the text asked, "What then shall we do?" or as we ask in our Catechism, "What does this mean?" Let the Word of God speak to us, let the Spirit come and enlighten us and move us to works "in keeping with repentance."

This fire does not just separate believers from unbelievers, the righteous from the unrighteous. This baptismal fire purifies individual pieces, just as the Holy Spirit is the presence of God breathed out and imparted: God's presence means his glory, and the wicked cannot stand in his glory, for his glory brings wrath on the sinful. Anything wicked will be destroyed in this wrath. Here is the knowledge of the Law, which led the people to come to John "to flee from the wrath to come." Fire, in fact, does precisely the same thing water does, but in a more intense and violent way. Water cleanses by washing away the filth. Fire cleanses by obliterating the filth.

So Jesus was to baptize "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Are you ready to volunteer for this baptism? It sounds terrifying. How can it be "good news"? Fire means God's wrath. The fact is, however, before baptizing *us* in fire, Jesus was himself

baptized in fire. He said, "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:49-50). The baptism he spoke of, which caused him such distress, was his crucifixion. It was there, on the cross, as he suffered and died, that Jesus was consumed by the fire of God's wrath. He did that in your place. In fact, when he was baptized in the Jordan and "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove" (Luke 3:22), he was accepting a baptism which was "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3), but he himself was sinless. Already in Jesus' baptism he was stepping into the place of sinners and walking towards the place where he would take their punishment. Now when we are baptized, as Jesus commanded us to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19), "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). We who have been baptized into his death have through that means already passed through the fire of wrath and come out on the other side purified. Do you see how the purifying fire is miraculously hidden under the water of baptism, even as the Spirit is hidden there, bringing his sanctification into our hearts? "Thus the 'fire' of the Mightier One who comes baptizing 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (3:16) includes both the judgment fire of hell for those who refuse to repent," for rejection of God's grace brings wrath even on those who have been baptized, "and the purifying, sanctifying fire of the Spirit [which was] poured out on

Pentecost as ‘tongues of fire’ (Acts 2:3)”³ and was passed from those disciples on to anyone else baptized in the same baptism.

II. To Receive the King

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin?” (Rom. 6:1). Paul asks this hypothetical question before proving that our baptism now, in which we are baptized into Christ, means that we have passed through the fire of God’s wrath and “died to sin” (Rom. 6:2). Likewise John admonishes, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Fire, water, and the Spirit are all found in our baptisms. That baptism washes us of sin, purges us of the Old, sinful Adam, declaring us forgiven and just in God’s eyes on account of the payment Jesus made in our place, and the Holy Spirit is placed in our hearts, and therefore we become a new creation, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10), to be healthy trees that bear good fruit, “the fruit of the Spirit” dwelling in us, which “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). This list is all in answer to the question, “What then shall we do?” As we sing in our hymn,

O rich the gifts Thou bring’st us,
Thyself made poor and weak;
O love beyond expression,
That thus can sinners seek!
For this, O Lord, will we

³ Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 140.

Our joyous tribute bring Thee,
And glad Hosannas sing Thee,
And ever grateful be.⁴

We “Rise” and give “praise and homage to this King, “The giver of all blessing”⁵ because we have received his blessing. The works John advises we do, the fruits he advises us to bear, are the proofs of our being the good wheat, and not the useless chaff: for we have been purged of the useless chaff by baptism with fire and the Spirit.

The judgment, the “wrath to come,” is very real; and we have been singing about its advent for weeks. But if we are truly “Children of the Kingdom,” if we have been baptized into Christ Jesus, passed through the fire of God’s wrath and placed safely on the side of his forgiveness, then we can be certain that this judgment means our salvation, not our destruction. Jesus baptizes us with fire, but only because he himself has taken all the fire for us. So rise, and receive this king, you children of the kingdom!

Amen.

⁴ ELH #105 v. 5.

⁵ Ibid. vv. 1, 4.