

January 9, 2022 – Isaiah 43:1-7, Romans 6:1-11, Luke 3:15-22

As someone who grew up in Akron, Ohio during the 1980's and 90's, when I think of the Cuyahoga River, I think of some really wonderful natural beautiful. The Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Boston Mills & Brandywine Ski Resorts. The steam engines of the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad winding along the river banks.

But for most other people, particularly those of generations before me, the only thing they remember about the Cuyahoga is that it's the river that burned. The river where the water was so polluted with industrial waste that the water caught fire. And it didn't just catch fire once, or twice, or three times. No, the Cuyahoga River caught fire no less than 13 times.

It wasn't until 1969 that anything was done about it. That year, Time magazine published an article about the fiery history of the Cuyahoga. Describing it as a river that “oozes rather than flows,” and saying that people don't drown in the Cuyahoga. They decay.

I'm happy to say that the article worked. Not coincidentally, 1969 was also the last year that it caught fire. And the river I grew up with was much improved over what Time magazine described. Today, not only have fish returned to it, but in 2019 the EPA even said it was safe to eat them. Supposedly.

Still, the idea of a river burning left quite an impression on our nation. One that wasn't quickly forgotten. It just shouldn't happen. Water doesn't burn. The two concepts are antithetical to each other. And the sheer paradox of putting them together immediately catches our attention.

And yet, that's exactly what happens in our Gospel lesson today. Here we have John the Baptist, ministering by a different river: the Jordan River. And the people coming to him are wondering if he is the Christ.

Which is kind of an interesting thing to say. Because everybody in Judea and Galilee had a different idea of who or what the Christ would be. They were all looking for the Christ, the Messiah, the one sent by God to save them. But no one could agree on exactly what the Christ would look like when he came. What exactly he would do for them.

This particular group of people in our text have apparently decided that the Christ looks like John the Baptist. John is certainly a godly and righteous man, and a great prophet, so it's not a crazy thought. But he is quick to tell them, “No guys, that's not me. I baptize you with water. The real Christ will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with... fire.”

Which is, as I said, kind of a bizarre statement. Because baptism by definition requires water. It is the application of water to purify something. Despite what the Baptists will tell you, how much water is irrelevant. It can be a little water. It can be a lot of water. But there's always water.

And yet here, John is telling us that the Christ will apply water to us with fire. So we're all going to be baptized in a burning river? Eek. No. Definitely not.

But there is a bit of a paradox here, nonetheless. Because we do have two opposites at play: water and fire. For that matter, we have another set opposites as well: water and the Holy Spirit. Which, honestly, is just as paradoxical as water and fire. It's physical and spiritual. How do those go together?

And John won't stop with these contrasts. He continues, saying, “*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.*” Now we've got a new image, but still a set of opposites: wheat and chaff. Wheat is alive. It grows. It gives life. You can eat it as food. You can plant it as a crop.

Chaff has none of those qualities. It's dead. It's waste. You can't really do anything productive with it. You gather it up after the harvest is done, after the wheat is threshed, and you burn it. Because it's not a grain of wheat. It's the opposite of a grain of wheat.

John the Baptist isn't the only one to describe baptism in terms of opposites. St Paul does as well. He writes: *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*

Baptism is fire. Baptism is water. Baptism is burning the chaff. Baptism is saving the wheat. Baptism is a physical act with water. Baptism is a spiritual act by the Holy Spirit. Baptism is death with Christ on the cross. Baptism is life through Christ in the resurrection.

Baptism is all of those things. And our Old Testament Lesson actually helps us see how. In verse two, Isaiah writes this beautiful passage about God's protection: *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”*

I can't tell you how many times I have turned to that verse in my life. It is a wonderfully comforting proclamation of God's everlasting care for us. But then Isaiah continues. And he says something that probably doesn't resonate as well to our modern ears: *“I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.”*

If you're wondering, Cush and Seba are just another, more poetic way of describing ancient Egypt. This is all a reference back to the Exodus. Back to God killing the firstborn of the Egyptians during the Passover. Back to God drowning Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea.

God is not a killer. He is a creator. He gives life and life abundantly. That is his nature. That is his proper work. It is an alien work – a strange and unnatural work – for God to kill and destroy. Yet what God is saying in this passage is, “I killed a whole lotta people for your sake. Because I love you, I will destroy entire nations to keep you safe. I will give their lives in exchange for yours. I will do whatever it takes so that you may live.”

Including send his own Son to the cross. Including put his own Son in the grave. Including die so that we may live. The destruction of Egypt saved the Israelites from slavery. The crucifixion of Jesus saved us from death and hell.

It saved us from death and hell because by baptism we are crucified with him. Everything evil in us. Everything sinful in us. Everything that rejects God's will in us. Is nailed to the cross. It is gathered like chaff to be burned. It is thrown into the water and drowned like Pharaoh's army.

It is killed. We are killed in Baptism. So that we may live in Baptism. So that we may be planted like a kernel of wheat that springs up to new life. So that we who are mortal and physical may be reborn by the Holy Spirit as immortal and spiritual.

Baptism is death. Baptism is life. And it continues to be death and life throughout our lives. Because that old Adam doesn't want to stay dead. Every morning, he wakes up ready to take control. Ready to do the most selfish thing he can think of. The most ungodly act he can find. He can't be controlled.

But he can be killed. He can be shoved under the waters of baptism until the bubbles stop. Every time we remember that we are a baptized child of God, we kill that old Adam. Every time we remember that Christ has died to forgive my sins, we kill that old Adam. Every time we remember that my sins are worthless chaff burned in the flames of God's love for me, we kill that old Adam.

And when that old Adam dies, a new man rises up. A man who is called by God's name. Who is created for God's glory. Who is formed and made by the Lord himself.

A man who passes through water and is not drowned. Who walks through fire and is not burned. For he is saved by the Holy One of Israel, our Savior. He has nothing to fear. For the Lord is with him and will gather him up from wherever he wanders.

Baptism is fire and Baptism is water. Not because it's a burning river, filled with pollution. But because it is pure water. The purest water. Water pure enough to cleanse us. Water pure enough to burn us. Burn away all that is impure within us. Burn away the man who is enslaved to sin. And bring him to nothing. So that we, the new man, are set free to walk in the newness of life that Jesus gives to us. Amen.