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Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

WATER, SPIRIT, FIRE

My first ordained position was serving a congregation in Memphis, Tennessee. Unfortunately, like some churches, the building suffered occasional break-ins as people in their desperation were looking to take something that was intended to be used in the service of God. I remember with dismay walking into the building one Monday morning to see that the door of the financial office of the church had been bashed open with some large object. We, of course, stored no money in the church building, but someone must have thought that the Sunday offering was locked up in there and they wanted access to it. What was additionally disheartening had to do with what the would-be burglar had used to gain entry to the room. The baptismal font, as substantial in design as our own, had been taken from the sanctuary, to be used as a battering ram to smash open the door. Both the door and the font were damaged, but could be repaired, and probably more easily than could the life of the would-be burglar.

I think of the ironies of the use of the baptismal font, a worship implement to be used in the expression of God's grace, utilized instead in ways to diminish God's work in the world. I think of the brute physical force used to bash open the door, using something that normally exemplifies spiritual powers. And yet, I also recognize that baptism has at times been seen as that which gets a person access to celestial treasures, as if some water on the head with the blessings of the church could get someone through the figurative pearly gates of heaven. There are even some churches that proclaim that being baptized as a Christian will give a person access to physical treasure in this life.

What is the significance of the waters of baptism? And what is this talk not only of water, but also of Spirit and fire in our scripture passages today? We begin to explore these questions with our first reading from Isaiah, words which came to the Hebrew people at a time of desperation for them. When the world shifts on its axis and the seas roar with fearful change, such times can be among the most challenging for anyone, including people of faith.

A historian who grew up as a Jewish orphan in Berlin, remembers when his safe and secure world became a world of terror. On a cold January day in 1933 when he was only 15 years old, he was walking his little sister home from school when he saw at a newsstand a headline bearing frightening news that would change his life, change the life of all Jews, change the life of the whole world. “Adolph Hitler Appointed Chancellor of Germany,” the headline read. Later in his life, Eric Hobsbawm reflected on that moment and said it was as if “we were on the Titanic and everyone knew it was going to hit the iceberg.” As Europe hurdled out of control toward World War II, the old world was violently ripped apart, with great uncertainty about what would come next. Hobsbawm said that it was like living, “between a dead past and a future not yet born.” ¹

Living between a dead past and a future not yet born. That was similar to the situation of the Jews in the Bible who heard this proclamation from the prophet we find in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah. Their old world had died. What had happened was that the world’s great superpower at that time, Babylon, had marched on their home, the city of Jerusalem, crushed it, and left it in ruins. Many Jews were taken back to Babylon as war prisoners. They felt like they were pawns in a game they could not control. Just when it was hard to believe that things could get any worse, they seemed to. A new power, Persia, arose in the East and was rattling its swords against Babylon. Now, once again, the Jews were in harm’s way in the middle of a war zone. Babylon was sure to be destroyed. Fears swept the city. What would become of the weak and frightened little colony of Jews? Were the wheels of history about to roll over them again? They were living between a dead past and a future not yet born. And they were afraid.

But through Isaiah, God says, “Do not be afraid.” This was not a message from some distant deity or impersonal force. Rather this was and is a God who says in bringing a past back to life: “I created you. I formed you.” This is also a God giving birth to a vibrant future: “I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. I treasure you as my beloved. You are mine.” God worked through the Persian emperor Cyrus who sent the Hebrew people back to their home in Jerusalem. That would not mean they would no longer face challenges. On their journey they would encounter waters, but God would bring them through. They would face fiery trials,

but God's own people would not be consumed. By grace they would make it through because they were treasured and beloved in God's sight.

Then in our gospel reading, we hear of the ministry of John the Baptizer, a religious figure who some thought might be the Messiah, the promised deliverer of Israel. All the gospel accounts, however, make it clear that John recognized Jesus as the Messiah, that his role was simply to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. In Luke, that message comes when John says, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming;... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Following scriptural guidance, we baptize with water here, and usually that is a rather calm occurrence, not the occasion of a baptismal font being used to bash through something blocking access to the riches of God.

But a baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire is a bit more unnerving. Luke would use the combination of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and the presence of fire in the descriptions of the Day of Pentecost in the Book of Acts. God's fire would thaw those who were frozen in fear and timidity. It would purify their priorities. The Spirit would fire them up. We needn't be motivated by the riches of heaven or of earth thinking that some baptism or baptismal font can bash its way to them on our behalf. Rather it is the very gift of God's Spirit that comes to us in baptism, that makes clear our identity as God's beloved children who are being led by God on a purposeful, redemptive journey. That Spirit moves within us so that we become less like the burglar who tried to swipe something or someone intended to be used in the service of God. Through our baptism of water and Spirit and fire, God once again says, "I created you. I formed you. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. I treasure you as my beloved. You are mine." Then God delivers us from a life gone astray or from being fearfully trapped behind locked doors to a life joining God's liberation of others. Our baptism does not bash down the doorway to our resistance, but it does open the door to the One who knows the treasure within us because God is the One who put it there. Would-be burglars, like you and me, who would try to swipe that which belongs to God, have opened to us the way to get our lives repaired. Thanks be to God – through our identity in baptismal waters, we have been given a resurrected past and a vibrant future. Alleluia! Amen.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life, Pantheon, 2003.