

Jan. 9. 2011 Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Isaiah 42: 1-9, Matthew 3: 1-17

Claimed and Called/Baptized with the Holy Spirit and Fire

I have a confession to make.

I had a sermon all written on Friday. I knew I was going to be busy all day yesterday, so I managed to get my sermon finished Friday so I could rest last night and not have to stay up last night writing.

And then, as I watched the news, I heard over and over again about the shooting in Tucson, Arizona.

A total of 18 people were shot. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot in the head at pointblank range and is fighting for her life.

One of the 6 people who were killed was a nine-year old girl. Another was a judge. Others were members of Giffords' staff.

In the wake of this tragedy I cannot stand up here this morning and preach the nice warm fuzzy sermon that I had planned to preach.

Somehow together we need to try to find a way to make sense of this senseless act of violence.

And I think that it's appropriate, somehow fortuitous, that this is what I need to talk about on this Sunday when we are remembering our baptisms.

Let me read the scripture passage for this morning, but I want to expand the reading. Instead of beginning at the 13th verse of the third chapter of Matthew, I am going to begin at verse 1 and continue to read through verse 17.



Today, as we remember our baptisms, we need to pay attention to the words of John the Baptist. His calling was to prepare the hearts and minds of the people for the coming of the Lord, to get people to want a closer relationship with God so that they would be ready to hear what Jesus was going to be teaching them.

And so he was preaching and teaching and baptizing people. At the same time, he was telling people that he was not the Messiah, that another person was coming after him who is greater than him.

The baptism of John the Baptist was, according to John himself, a baptism with water for repentance. Repentance is literally a turning, a change of heart and mind, a turning away from sin and turning toward God.

Repentance can be thought of as a paradigm shift, a change in the way you look at the world. Instead a self-centered, sinful world view, you turn to be able to see the world from God's point of view----

a way that sees the hope, the potential, the love, the light that exists in the world-----

NOT seeing only the sin-filled, dark side of people, NOT seeing only hopelessness and despair. We, as human beings, cannot see the whole picture of our lives, of creation, of what has happened.

But God can. And repentance means learning to see little pieces of that big picture, enough of it to be able to trust that the big picture that God sees is hopeful, holds meaning, shines with light and love.

We use water for baptism to symbolize this repentance, this washing away the dirt and sin of the world from our lives and from our eyes so that we can see a little more of what God sees when he looks at us, when he looks at all of creation.

And we, as we try to absorb this mass shooting in Arizona, we want to understand. We want to see the big picture of all this horrifying event that God sees. But we can't.

We have to trust that God is with the people who were shot, with their families, with their friends, with us as we try to make sense out of something that doesn't make sense.

We need to let God be God and do whatever God will do. We need to know that God still loves the world enough to send Jesus to save us.

We need to know that God is saving us, even in the midst of this mass killing.

But how can we know that when we're scared and confused and shocked? When we know that families have been ripped open by grief? When we don't know why things happened the way they did?

John the Baptist tells us that he baptized with water for repentance, but that Christ would baptize with fire and with the Holy Spirit.

What does this mean?

Being baptized by fire does not mean that we all have to be somehow burned by life. It doesn't mean that there is some kind of test we have to pass to make it into the Kingdom of God. After all, Jesus repeatedly said that the Kingdom of God is near, that it is among us and within us.

Fire has a different meaning. Being baptized with fire, I think, is related to repentance. If we look at fire not as destructive of life but as purifying, like gold and other metals are purified by fire, like grain is purified when the inedible chaff is blown away or burned away, then being baptized by fire is a purification, a way of getting rid of the parts of us that are not useful, the pieces of us that are destructive or that hold us back.

When the chaff is still on the grain, it gets in the way of the grain being used for food. It prevents the grain from fulfilling its purpose, its calling, if you will, to be useful to us as food.

When we are contaminated by sin, we do not behave as beloved children of God should. By being baptized by fire, the chaff that is sin that prevents us from fulfilling our calling to be the people God created us to be, is burned away,

leaving us clean and useful and not weighed down by something that clings to us and holds us back.

Baptism by fire can take many forms. It can definitely involve being tested by the hard times of life. When life gets hard, do we draw closer to God? Do we conclude that God is with us no matter how bad things get? Or do we withdraw, believing that God doesn't care about us?

Baptism by fire can also mean finding out what sets your heart on fire---where your passion lies, what you have a burning desire to do in life. When your heart---when your SOUL is on fire, you are being baptized by fire. You are becoming the person that God created you to be!

Maybe this horrifying shooting in Arizona is your baptism by fire. Maybe you are drawing closer to God in your confusion, your fear, your shock over what has happened.

Maybe you are finding your heart on fire to find a way to prevent this from ever happening again. Maybe your heart is breaking for the families and that will lead you to do something for people who are stricken by grief.

I don't know if you are being baptized by fire by yesterday's events, but you know. And if you are, then follow that leading. It is God's call on your life, the call that is coming from your baptism by fire.

John the Baptist also tells us that Christ will baptize us by the Holy Spirit.

And this brings me to point out something.

In the sacrament of baptism, we use water. The water symbolizes more than just being washed, although it does mean that our sin is washed away.

We baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

One way of thinking about this is to think that baptism in the name of the Father is the baptism of repentance, that with those words we are turned around to see with God's eyes, to love with God's heart.

And when we say that we baptize in the name of the Son, we are baptizing with the fire of Christ's passion, his love for the world and the claim on us as God's beloved children.

And when we say that we baptize in the name of the Holy Spirit, we are, of course, acknowledging the baptism of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to answer God's call to serve God and serve others in whatever ways that we are equipped by our gifts and our talents.

So how does all this help us to make sense of the mass killing in Tucson yesterday?

It doesn't. I don't think God made this happen for a reason. There is no higher purpose. It is not some kind of test or punishment from God. It was an evil act and we should not expect or hope to understand evil.

It's okay not to understand. Understanding, even if we could, would not make it any better. Even if we find out what the shooter's reasons were, it won't explain why, really. Not in the bigger picture.

So, what do we do with this? Where do we go from here?

We need to mourn, as a nation, just like we do whenever a public figure is killed. We need to support each other however we can. Maybe we can send cards to the families or write a letter to the editor of a newspaper.

If your heart is on fire to help in any way or to do something specific, I encourage you to follow that desire. It is the Holy Spirit working in you.

I have a few more ideas. We don't need to fix blame or point fingers. We don't need to be angry at some other group or person----we don't need to make this into yet another "us vs them" situation.

We need to understand that other people, that "THEY" are just as much God's children, God's creation, as "WE" are, that their lives are valued by the creator of the universe just as much as ours are,

that people who disagree with us are not part of some vast conspiracy, that 99 times out of 100 they just have a different idea of what should be done for the common good.

I am not trying to get political. I am trying to remind us all of our place in the Kingdom of God, which very well might be right next to someone who thinks, looks, acts, prays, believes very differently from the way we do!

I am trying to remind us all of our common humanity, that none of us is perfect.

And if we are ever praying “Thank God I am not like THEM” like the Pharisees did, then we are going to be on the receiving end of John’s harsh words---“You brood of vipers! Who warned YOU to flee from the wrath to come??” He is going to be talking to us!!

It's time, people, it's time to tone down the rhetoric, to remove the violence and the harshness from our speech so that it will never again lead anyone to walk up to a stage set up at a Safeway Store and start shooting people at close range.

We can do this. We can raise the level of discourse in this country to reduce the amount of violence in our lives. This is not a political act. It's an act of salvation.

Not only our salvation, but the salvation of others.

Repentance means seeing the world through the eyes of God, loving with the heart of God. When we can look at other people, our fellow human beings, with the eyes of God and believe that God loves them, our attitudes will change. Our speech will change.

And I truly believe that our lives will change.

Because we will have far fewer acts of violence to try to understand.

This morning as we remember our baptisms, let us come once again with repentant hearts, renouncing the forces of wickedness and resisting evil in all of its forms.

And let us pray to be given the eyes and heart of God, renewing our vision and our love today and every day for the rest of our lives.

Amen.