

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight Lord,
our strength and our redeemer

Our reading from the Gospel today describes an event—the baptism of Jesus—that is at once so familiar and so astounding. How the image of John the Baptist is dramatic and memorable: a man crying out in the wilderness, clothed in camel's hair, eating grasshoppers. How could every Sunday School child not commit that image to memory?

Familiar and astounding. John is making straight paths for the people of Judea to recognize and be blessed by the coming of God in human form—for the coming of Jesus. John has been telling God's message about Jesus since before birth. Remember when the child in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy when Mary entered the house?—Mary who also was with child?—Mary the mother of Jesus. John knew and believed, even then. Astounding.

John as a grown man is an ardent believer, passionate man of faith, responding to God's call to help the Judeans understand, to help them (and us) to faith and blessedness.

What does John instruct? How will we prepare for the Lord? We must be cleansed of our sins through repentance. We will step on our straightened path toward God by owning our sins, our transgressions-- and asking for forgiveness. John will herald this turn to God through baptism with water, and he promises that a more blessed, more profound baptism will come when Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. John baptizes regular people in the Jordan River, AND he baptizes Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is with us in the river, with us on that first step finding our way to God. Astounding.

But that's not even close to all that happens at the river. The heavens are rent, the Holy Spirit falls on Jesus like a dove, and God's voice announces his son—"you are my son, you are my beloved, I am well-pleased with you!" We see Jesus baptized twice in this scripture. What John foretold is true—God baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The blessing of the Holy Spirit is a kept promise for God's people. In an astounding few sentences, St Mark has drawn a scene of urgency, devotion, excitement, optimism, good news—and above all—love.

It's been said that human beings exist in expanding circles of engagement with the world—we have a public self, a private self, and a secret self. Or maybe really it's telescoping—we are more candid in our private self with friends and family than we are in our public self—which is where we project to the world the image that we and others have made for us. It is in our secret self that we are alone with God, alone with the Holy Spirit. When we are in our secret self, we have metaphorically left all that is important to us in the world including our family as Jesus instructed—and are alone with God, the Holy Spirit.

Baptized with the Holy Spirit—an astounding act that creates our personal, individual intimacy with God. In Handel's lyrics, this intimacy allows us to sit with the Counselor and listen to the Advocate, where our hearts are soothed by the Comforter. This is our heart of hearts. As Christians, of course we are alive to God's work and presence in all the ways of our existence, and we strive to be an active agent of God's love. As humans, we are awestruck by God's power in our world. The Psalm today describes God's force as a storm, his voice like thunder over the waters, full of majesty, flashing like flame and shaking the wilderness. But the truly amazing power of God is the personal relationship he gives us, through Jesus Christ. We all

have this, he knows each of us by name, he counts all the sparrows. It's true, it's our own kept promise--we hear it and feel it through God's Holy Spirit.

And are we not in a place and time when God's spirit is needed more than ever? A deadly pandemic, an unsustainable economy, profound inequities, societal unrest—all of these conditions and events are crushing. Fear, loneliness, sorrow stalk us day and night. We feel such isolation and long to be together with our church family and in our communities. I have wept in the past week in such sadness—the surging pandemic, so much preventable death, so many devastated families that couldn't be with their stricken ones at the end of life. The long lines of people waiting for food bank donations, the families facing eviction, the closing businesses. I have wept for the health care workers who have borne with such courage the heavy burden of the disease—risking their own lives and their families to save and heal as many people as possible. Persevering despite the needlessness of so much infection, bearing the excruciating trauma of rationing health care when ambulances, and oxygen, and ICU beds, and staffing have topped out. Is this not a time of unimaginable sadness?

I remember saying to Pastor Tim back in April that the pandemic had made me feel in a real sense more at one with the world than at any time in my life. “Everyone in the world is facing this same immediate threat” I said. “Everyone is afraid, apprehensive, relying on science, and medicine, and government and health care workers. Everyone shares the same hope for a vaccine and deliverance.” I felt a new sense of knowing, a new sense of kinship with the billions of God's children that inhabit the world.

So much has happened since April. Things are better—the miraculous delivery of several effective vaccines-- and still bad. The spread of the virus in our nation is worse than ever. The pandemic has shown us in very real terms how inequitable life in America is for many in our communities. Civil discord rips us apart.

And yet the Holy Spirit is with us still—we see it in our communities and we feel it in our heart of hearts. We are sorrowful, but we are not suffering. Hope and faith buoy us in these times. Prayer, discipleship and ministry sustain our life in God’s world. We gathered as a church family with masks and blankets in our fold up chairs among the pumpkins well into the fall. Our Thrift Store still ministers to the community. We still provide free clothing to children in our neighborhoods. Saints in our church family have labored weekly to keep us connected to each other, to the word of God, and to our work in God’s name.

Are we not the people of God to bring the good news? To minister to the lonely and abandoned? To soothe the discord—as Paul says: “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Lord in this time of fear and distrust, we pray your spirit will enliven our hearts to be caretakers, bringers of justice, banishers of inequity, healers, and peacemakers.

From the beginning and before the beginning, God’s spirit has brought form and order and light to his creation. In Genesis, the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters and in that first act of life-giving power, the heavens and the earth were set alive, light was separated from darkness, and the heartbeat of day and night, sunrise and sunset, began its steady pulse in the

universe. From this beginning at time immemorial, from this expanse throughout creation, to the present second and our heart of hearts, God's spirit is above all, through all and in all.

Amen