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Feast of Our Lord's Baptism, Year C

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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"I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today in our Gospel lesson, as we mark the Feast of Our Lord's Baptism, there are three levels of baptism that I want to consider with you. The first is John's baptism: John's baptism of those repentant sinners who came to him in the wilderness by the river Jordan are not us today, and they weren't Jesus then. They came to partake in a ritual cleansing or purification in preparation for the Messiah, the long-awaited ruler and king who would restore Jerusalem, the people of Israel. And John's baptism was characterized by repentance: a returning *from* the times that they had strayed from the Torah, from God's law, and a turning *towards* love for their neighbor and love for God. It was an act of recommitment to their faith, recommitment to God and to each other.

Then there is Jesus' baptism, which, as John himself recognizes, is distinct because Jesus did not need to repent or return. Yet there is something powerful about the one who was fully in line with the Torah as we believe Jesus was, still undergoing this ritual, not only to fulfill the ancient prophesy of the Messiah, but also to demonstrate that he never stood apart, that as a leader he always joined with the rest of humanity. He leads his followers then and now into the waters of Jordan. With Jesus' baptism there is also rich imagery, which echoes through the Hebrew Scriptures of the anointing of a king or prophet, and so when Jesus enters into the Jordan it served as his anointing for ministry, for his purpose as the Messiah, which itself means "the anointed one."

So then, what is our baptism? The Church's baptism is similar to Jesus's baptism in that during Jesus' baptism, the dove, which was the Holy Spirit in some mysterious way, descends. As we see in the book of Acts, the Church is born when the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles, and they speak with tongues of fire.

We might wonder at this use of "fire"? It would seem that it is in stark contrast to water, and, of

course, images of “unquenchable fire” are in our hearts and minds right now with the haunting images coming to us from Southern California. What do we make of this allusion to God’s judgment as fire?

In this text we have an image of God, Jesus specifically, as an agricultural worker, a farmer who used a winnowing fork, a kind of pitchfork, in order to toss up the grains and allow the seeds, the part that we eat, to fall onto a threshing floor, while the chaff, the external husk that was not useful or nutritious, floated up and then was gathered and burned. God is depicted here as one who cultivates that which is sustaining and nourishing. Yet this cultivation process involves loosening the useless shells or husks, and burning them.

The word “chaff” is rich with allusions to lies or false natures: we might think of the ego. And so while we may often think of these allusions to God’s judgment as being, perhaps, a grand ceremony of splitting up the good people and the bad people, those included and those not included, this winnowing actually applies to everyone who comes into contact with God’s purity, God’s goodness. In order to enter into God’s kingdom, God’s wholeness, we all need to be purified.

This is what our baptism is: it is both John’s baptism – repentance, the purification, the preparation for God – and it is Jesus’ baptism – we are being anointed for ministry in Jesus’ body. Jesus is our head, and we are his body, and as our head he leads us through death into new life. Baptism is thus rich with imagery of both purification and rebirth, of new life. And new life always requires some form of death.

Here at St. Martin’s, we are poised for a rebirth of sorts. And so, this Sunday before our new rector, our new leader, arrives, it is appropriate to remember our baptism, to remember the commitment that goes with the grace of baptism. God has declared that we are God’s own as, even for those of us who were baptised as infants, we believe that we can do nothing, but God gives us everything. As we make our way to partake of God’s body today and prepare to embrace our new leader, let us remember that we *are* God’s body. That in this grace that we participate in at the Eucharist, we are committing again and again to the sloughing off, to the repentance, to the work of shedding the ego in order to be *for* Jesus, in both God and in each other. Amen.