

Going To Town -- Pentecost C

I baptize you with water, but the one who comes after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire! This was the preaching message of John the Baptizer, as the people of Jerusalem and all Judea came out to be baptized in the Jordan. But who wants to be baptized with fire?

We cling to this metaphor in the Church, as something extra special, special enough to celebrate on its own festival day, today, the Day of Pentecost. But a baptism by fire in any other context means a rude awakening, a slap in the face, a cold shower, like being put in the saddle before you really know how to ride a horse. When I was sixteen, Howard Dixon, the noble farmer I was working for in Indiana asked me if I could drive a stick shift – he wanted me to go to town for a tractor part as I recall. Being a little hard of hearing, or a lot old school or both, when I said “No,” he said “Good – Go into town and pick up that p.t.o. schackle’s waiting for me at Crider’s.”

It being July in Indiana, the weather was more than a little warm on the hog farm. And although the well water was very sweet and plentiful, there just never seemed to be enough of it to cool you off until quitting time. Much as I liked my job of operating a one row manual cultivator -- a hoe -- The prospect of an hour tooling down 52 to Rushville and back with the windows open and Delta Dawn and Brandy on the radio was mighty tempting. So I waited til he went back in the house before setting off, coughing and bucking and stalling down the driveway, and enjoyed an hour and a half of yee-ha in the middle of a long hot summer of soo-eee. Baptism by fire indeed.

Throughout our history with the God we hear about in the Bible, the God of Sarah of Isaac and Rebekah, of Leah and Rachel and Jacob; throughout the long, complicated, magnificent flow of stories we know as our salvation history, the great milestones have been the covenants God has made with humankind.

There are the two big covenants: The one with Noah and the one on Pentecost. The ones in between are far from trivial: Abraham is promised children numbered like the stars for his obedience; Moses is promised special status for him and all his people in exchange for their obedience. David is promised permanent royal status for his house and lineage. But these three all have more to do with circumstances and behaviors that separate God from humanity, and they all have conditions attached. The two biggies, the bookends, the alpha and the omega that align us with God permanently and unconditionally are the one with Noah (water) and the one through Jesus (the Holy Spirit Fire).

Never again will I use my power to destroy humanity – no matter what. That’s what God says after the big baptism, the Flood. Nature does indeed include death and destruction but it is never be a result of angry divine retribution. People are the ones who get mad and go mad and will violence. Nature does indeed kill, but only people murder.

In the person of Jesus, God made an equally unconditional and permanent promise: “I am sending another advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom you know, who abides within you.” We receive the same kind of spirit God’s very self wields, the spirit of reconciliation and healing among all people: the power to carry out miracles of lovingkindness if only we will use it.

In a vastly diverse world, the world after Babel it is only with this kind of spirit that we have any hope of getting along. After the flood, Noah's sons are told to be fruitful and multiply; so each fathers a tribe and each tribe has its own language. Scholars tell us that the Flood story comes from a different stream of stories than the Babel story we just heard today -- if they all had different languages already, then the Babel story doesn't make much sense. Both of these stories are trying to make sense of a diverse world. In Babel, everyone is speaking the same language and trying to curl up like cultural roly poly bugs. We'll build us a big brick tower and just be pure. But God -- as nature -- will have none of that. As with Noah's sons, God insists that people be fruitful and multiply and diversify. He ain't mad, he's just saying the world won't work without all us different kinds of fruits.

Today at Pentecost we are bidden to hit the reset button on diversity. And revive our awareness of the Spirit within us. We celebrate the truth that all God's children have equal status and equal access to the power of that Spirit; all are baptized by fire. At Pentecost, we get a glimpse of original perfection, like the face of a child in the moment of a lightning flash. Pentecost is the time God reminds us we have all been given the same fire of compassion just before we exploded into the glorious diversity of nature. It is our fuel, our passion and the compass that can lead us home.

God would have us know that we are individuals meant to be both diverse and unified. We are not meant to make names for ourselves, but to learn the names of others; to call each other by name and celebrate the glowing warmth of Spirit that moves us to offer our singular and humble care to the rest of the fruits, whoever they may be.