

The First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 1, 2016
Year C, RCL

E. Bevan Stanley

Isaiah 43:1-7
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

John the Baptist said, “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming. . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I with water, he with the Holy Spirit and with fire. When I will baptize someone, I baptize with water, and Jesus baptizes the candidate with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Actually these are not two events, but one. We take the candidate back to the font and pour water on him. At the same time Jesus breathes into the candidate the divine breath, the wind of God, the Holy Spirit, and thereby ignites in him or her the fire of God, the flame of love, the purifying fire of the most holy. We anoint the candidate with oil to signify the coming of the Holy Spirit. We give her or him a candle to signify the flame with which he or she will burn and thereby illumine this dark world.

Four things come together in the rite of baptism, four elements: the candidate, water, spirit, and fire. These correspond to the four elements of the ancient world: earth, water, wind, and fire. We like baptisms. Especially if it is a tiny little baby. We can all ooh and ah over his or her supreme cuteness. But I want to point out what a terrible and awesome thing we do. In the rite of Baptism we enter the realm of the great powers and mysteries.

Let us consider the elements.

Earth. We start with the baby, with the human flesh and blood. Genesis teaches us that God made us from the dust of the earth. Science teaches us that we are made up of a couple of bucks

worth of miscellaneous chemicals. This beautiful bundle of tissue, of bones and veins, of skin and hair, of gurgles and burps and - was that a smile or maybe just gas? This is the biological issue of a pair of primates with large craniums, species "homo sapiens". This is pretty wonderful already, from the mysteries of the cell and the complexities of biochemical life to the genetic heritage of family traits, this human person is a glorious mystery of life. The earth is the source and end of the flesh. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Water. When we baptize we baptize with water. Water is the source of life. From water came the earliest life forms on this planet. And as ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, every baby begins in the water of its mother's womb. And what is true of every individual person is true of the nation, the People of God. For this people into which we initiate the candidate was born out of the waters of the Red Sea, when God gave birth to his people and led them from the bondage of Egypt and taught them to breathe the air of freedom in the sere wilderness of Sinai and finally in the green hills of the Promised Land.

In Baptism water signifies also the cleansing from sin, the dying to the world, and a rising to new life. These are two ways of talking about the same thing. Release from bondage, washing away of dirt and filth, dying to the old self, these all are ways of talking about the end of one kind of life and the beginning of another. The end of the merely human and the beginning of the divine, the end of the partial and the beginning of the whole, the end of the selfish and the beginning of loving.

Third, there is Wind. In terms of the biological we have seen an ascending order of being. We started with earth or simple matter, rocks sand, chemicals, no life at all. Then with water came life, the capacity for biochemistry to happen, plants use water and minerals. And now we add breath. As Genesis puts it, "God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his

nostrils the breath of life.” We are made of dirt and the breath of God. So too at birth, the critical moment when the baby emerges from the water of the womb is when the baby takes its first breath. How great is the relief and joy of the mother and father on hearing that first cry!

In Baptism we have the coming of the Holy Spirit. As when Jesus came up out of the River Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended on him, so also when a baptismal candidate rises from his or her washing, he or she will be anointed with the Chrism and is made a Christian. The candidate is marked as Christ’s own forever. But spirit is more than just breath; it is also the wind of God which blows where no one can know. It is the spirit in the sense of influence and character. As one might say that a house might retain the spirit of its owner, or an organization might be said to live out the spirit of its founder, so to be filled with the spirit of God is to share in God’s character, to be influenced by God’s presence, to be led by God’s whispering in the air. Furthermore, the Spirit of God is a spirit of power. It is the coming of the Spirit that makes a Christian life an incarnation of the divine. In Jesus, God became human that humans might become divine. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus. When we Baptize a person, we plant in him or her the seed of Jesus’ own character.

Finally fire. This is the most mysterious of all. For with fire we have stepped entirely beyond the natural realm. We have no evolutionary parallel. Perhaps we haven’t got there yet. Nor is there a parallel in the birth process. For fire has to do with the end, the purpose, the goal and consummation of life and of history. In scripture fire is connected with judgment and the end of the world. Fire has to do with purgation and purifying, a final burning away of everything that hinders us from approaching the most Holy God, King of the Universe, blessed is he. As the book of Hebrews puts it, “For our God is a consuming fire.” This is terrible and frightening, and can appear to us to be fatal and self-defeating. Yet this fire is the fire of love, not of destruction. This is the fire of passion. This is the fire in the belly that inspires great daring and mighty deeds. The fire we are

speaking of here is the flame of love. The flame that burns so fiercely that all that is not love falls away, the flame that melts down all barriers between the soul and the Beloved, the flame that removes all that hinders the lover from ascending to the place of final consummation and bliss. The flame that burns in every angel's face so that when met by a human the angel must say, "Fear not." And while for the self-centered soul, this flame can seem the unquenchable burning of hell, for the other-centered soul, it is the unquenchable flame of love and desire. And it is into that flame of love and on that altar of giving that we offer each candidate for baptism. It is into that flame on that altar of giving and love that we offer ourselves each time we make the Eucharist. We give the candidate a candle and tell him or her to burn with God's love as a light to the world, as a living testimony to the love with which God himself burns for this world and every person in it.

Earth, water, wind, and fire. Come Saints of God and adore, come angels and archangels lend your power, come holy and triune God, and make each of us your child as Jesus is. Make our human flesh divine. Let us hear you speak your word to each of us, "You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased." Amen.