

# WATER, FIRE, BLOOD

Luke 3:15-22

The Baptism of Our Lord (Series C)

January 9, 2022

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The gospel lesson for the Baptism of Our Lord comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 3, verses 15 through 22. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 3, beginning at verse 15, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>15</sup> As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

<sup>18</sup> So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. <sup>19</sup> But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup> added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Baptism is destructive.

It doesn't really look that way to us. To us it looks like simple water, and it sounds like plain words, sometimes followed by a baby's crying. At worst it might seem uncomfortable. It certainly doesn't look or sound destructive. But Scripture often describes Baptism as a destructive thing. It also describes Baptism as a saving thing. And sometimes it even speaks of Baptism in terms of destruction and salvation at the same time. That is because God usually saves by destroying. In all the great deliverance stories in the Bible, God saves his people by destroying something. And Baptism, according to Scripture, is no different. We'll talk about what this means for our baptisms, but first we need to talk about the baptism of Jesus.

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We heard most of this gospel lesson about a month ago, during the season of Advent, when we read Luke 3:1-20. We were considering, at that time, the ministry of John the Baptizer as he was preparing the way for the appearance of Jesus. Now, during the season of Epiphany, we turn our attention toward the ministry of Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus is a transition point in the gospels from the ministry of John the Baptizer to the ministry of Jesus. It's one of only a few events that is mentioned in all four gospels. That makes it an extremely significant event in the life of Jesus. I don't know if this list

is exhaustive, but the other events include Jesus' death and resurrection, of course, as well as the feeding of the five thousand and the triumphal entry. The transfiguration is only in three. The institution of the Lord's Supper is also only in three, although the fourth one, John, teaches about the Lord's Supper. The birth of Jesus is only in two of them, Matthew and Luke, three if we count John's theological explanation of the incarnation, and I think we can. But the baptism of Jesus is in all four. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the event, while the apostle John records John the Baptizer recalling the part about how he saw the Spirit descend and remain on Jesus (John 1:31-33).

The event that we typically associate with Epiphany, the visit of the Magi, is only in one Gospel, Matthew. And this doesn't take anything away from the importance of that event; it's highly significant, but the two great epiphany events are really the baptism of Jesus and his transfiguration. So we consider the baptism of Jesus the first Sunday in Epiphany and his transfiguration on the last Sunday in Epiphany. Those events are the bookends of the Epiphany season.

And this actually parallels the structure of Jesus' ministry in the gospels. There is a two part structure to Jesus' ministry. You can kind of see it in John, but it's especially noticeable in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and most especially in Luke. The first part of Jesus' ministry could be called his Epiphany season. The word Epiphany means "to shine upon." Think of it as the light of the world coming to shine upon this dark earth. It's the manifestation or revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. That's why I say his baptism and transfiguration are the two great Epiphany events, because in both of these events, an audible voice comes from heaven, saying, "You are my beloved Son" (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35). And in between these two great events are a whole bunch of miracles, where people wonder, "Could this be the Christ?" That's the first part of Jesus' ministry. So the season of Epiphany focuses on who Jesus is. He is revealed as the Christ and the Son of God.

In the second part of Jesus' ministry, he sets his face toward the cross (9:51). This occurs right around the same time as his transfiguration, so that's a real transition point. This is also about the same time that Jesus begins to predict his death. This second part of Jesus' ministry could be called his Lenten season. If Epiphany focuses on who Jesus is, Lent focuses on what he came to do. So this second part of his ministry is his journey to the cross. And that's really why we have an Epiphany season and a Lenten season in the Church calendar. These seasons parallel Jesus' ministry in the gospels. And it starts with Jesus' baptism.

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The Baptism of Jesus can be a puzzling event. In many places, Scripture teaches that Baptism forgives sins. Earlier in Luke we read that John proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3). But Jesus doesn't have any sins to be forgiven of. And John, apparently, knew this, because in Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism, John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you" (Matt. 3:14). But Jesus insisted, and John relented. So the thing that comes through, especially in Matthew's account, is that Jesus was baptized in order to identify with sinners. He comes to stand in our place, so he went and stood in the Jordan River to be baptized. That was a place for sinners. This foreshadowed that he would also go to the cross, a special place for the worst of sinners, and then to the grave, the final place for all sinners. He went to all these places in our place, and passed through them, so that he could also bring us to his place through his resurrection. We are baptized because we are sinners, and Jesus was baptized in order to identify with us. We are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, so that we will receive the benefits of his death and resurrection.

## WATER, FIRE, BLOOD (Luke 3:15-22)

The ministry of John sets up the baptism of Jesus. He says, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:16). At this point we start to get the impression that Baptism is not entirely safe. Nothing God does is really safe. If you want proof of this, just read the Bible, pretty much any part of it. You will soon realize that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not safe individuals. And nothing God does is really safe. He is always in control. Things never blow up in his face. But the things he does are not what we would consider safe. He kills people. He drowns people. He burns things. Even the gifts he gives to us are not safe. Baptism is not safe. The Lord’s Supper is not safe (1 Cor. 11:27-32). And God’s Word is a sword (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12).

God is not safe. When we take the things of God lightly, we are being dangerously naïve about God. And if we take the worship of God lightly, we are really acting like atheists. We usually think of atheism as a philosophy. But atheism isn’t just a thing of the mind. More than anything, it’s a lifestyle. You can confess that God exists. You can confess the doctrine of the Trinity. But if you go and live without any thought of God, you’re acting like an atheist. Churches are filled with practical atheists. This is also reflected in the way we worship. If we come into the house of God proudly or flippantly, what does that confess? Does it confess that we expect to meet God here? How would you act if you expected Jesus to preach to you or distribute the Lord’s Supper to you here? Well he is. True worship recognizes that God is in this place. True worship recognizes that God is holy. True worship recognizes that God is not safe. He is good, but he is not safe. We should not hesitate from coming. We should not be scared away from God’s presence, because the service God provides here is life-giving, life-saving, and life-preserving. Without it, you will die for all eternity. So we come in humility. Do not stay away, but come in fear; come in humility. Come confessing your sin, believing that Christ is here to forgive your sin, for this is what he promises to do through his dangerous means.

Even in your own homes, when you open the Word of God, this is not a safe thing. Even in the comfort and apparent safety of your home, God’s Word is still a sword. Think of it as lighting a fire in a fireplace. Imagine your home doesn’t have a furnace, and your only source of heat is a fireplace. Are you going to light a fire? Of course you are! But you’re going to be careful with it. You’re going to pay attention to it. And this fire will preserve your life. But if you are careless with this fire, it will destroy you. This is much like the Word of God. In the prophet Jeremiah, the LORD declares, “Is not my word like a fire and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23:29). God’s means are not safe.

If we despise God’s Word or his Sacraments, they will turn and condemn us. I remember a seminary professor saying to us, “Every time you hear God’s Word, it will either soften your heart, or harden your heart. You cannot leave unchanged.” I see this in my own heart, and I see it in the hearts of people I’ve ministered to. Sometimes I see you growing in the Word. I see your hearts softened. But there are others who heard the Word of God and were hardened. Some of them were very joyful at first, but then something changed. They don’t have a desire to grow in the faith. They seem to actually be worse off than before, because even the basic things that once brought joy to them, don’t have an effect anymore. I suppose every Christian goes through seasons of this. But if we do not repent, if we continually despise God’s Word and Sacraments, our hearts will be hardened, and these life-giving gifts will turn and condemn us. They are not safe. Do not take them lightly.

*The Gospel of Luke* describes Baptism in terms that are not safe. It actually speaks of three different baptisms. That might sound wrong, because we “acknowledge one Baptism for the

remission of sins” (Nicene Creed; cf. Eph. 4:5). But hold your tomatoes until after we consider what *The Gospel of Luke* presents. It speaks of three different baptisms, each with a different physical element. The three elements are water, fire, and blood. By the way, when John the Baptizer foretells that Jesus will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire,” we can connect the Holy Spirit with water Baptism, because Scripture does that elsewhere (e.g., Acts 2:38). But I want you to consider these three elements of water, fire, and blood. And consider how dangerous they are.

Water, of course, is not safe. We need it for life, but it can also become an unstoppable destructive force. Some of you experienced this when you fled your homes to escape the river. Water preserves life, it cleanses, and it drowns.

Fire is actually a lot like water. In many ways it is the opposite of water, but it really does the same things. Sometimes it preserves life, sometimes it cleanses, and sometimes it destroys. If not for fire, we would have all died this week. We have these metal boxes, usually in the basement, and inside these boxes is a fire. This fire keeps us alive. But if that metal box didn’t contain that fire, the flame that preserves our lives would turn and kill us. Fire is both dangerous and good. John said that Jesus would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Fire, like water, also cleanses. It purifies by literally consuming the filth. It is a very dangerous form of cleansing.

When John speaks of Jesus baptizing with fire, he’s not referring to our individual baptisms, but the baptism of fire at the end of all things, when Jesus destroys the world by fire. John continues, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (3:17). At Jesus’ return, he will save his people from the corruption of this world, and he will cleanse this earth, by consuming everything wicked. This is good, but extremely dangerous.

The third element is blood. The baptism of Jesus in Luke 3 is connected with something he says later in *The Gospel of Luke*. In chapter 12, verses 49 and 50, he says, “**I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished.**” Before Jesus baptizes the world in fire, he has a different baptism to endure. And this is a baptism that is only for Jesus. It is his baptism in blood. He’s talking about his crucifixion.

This was even hinted at during Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, when God the Father calls Jesus his “beloved Son.” It recalls Genesis 22, where God says to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, ... and offer him ... as a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:2). God, of course, did not allow Abraham to go through with it, but it was a foreshadowing of what God the Father would do, offering his only beloved Son for the sin of the world. So Jesus’ water baptism foreshadowed his bloody baptism.

This, again, is not safe. Blood preserves life. Blood is good, as long as you don’t see it. When you start to see blood outside of your body, that’s dangerous. Jesus, being baptized by the Father in his own blood, was certainly not safe. It killed him! But this is good, because this blood, like water and fire, also cleanses.

Blood is good, and blood is also dangerous. Consuming blood is dangerous. That’s why we cook our food. Other people’s blood is dangerous. Receiving another person’s blood could save your life, or it could kill you. Jesus gives us his blood to drink. This is dangerous. If we eat and drink without discerning the body, we eat and drink condemnation on ourselves (1 Cor. 11:29). But this blood also cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7), and whoever eats Christ’s flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life, and Jesus will raise him up on the last day (John 6:54).

## WATER, FIRE, BLOOD (Luke 3:15-22)

So these are the three baptisms in Luke: water, fire, and blood. And they're all dangerous. But God uses them all for our good.

Water Baptism, and here I'm talking about your water Baptism, is dangerous. Remember what we read from the epistle lesson in Romans 6: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). That sounds dangerous. It is dangerous. But God uses it for our good. The apostle Paul goes on, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Rom. 6:4-5). Water Baptism kills us by joining us to Jesus' bloody baptism. So there was a destruction in our baptisms. Water is dangerous. Water drowns things. And that is exactly what happened in our baptisms. The old, sinful nature in us was drowned. You have died with Jesus (Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:12; 3:3). And dying with Jesus, your sins have been washed away. Jesus endured the painful, bloody baptism, so that in our baptisms, we might die a painless and bloodless death.

And now, having been crucified with Jesus, we are protected from the fire baptism at the end of all things. Even that baptism is not bad. It is good, because that judgment will be our final deliverance, and God will bring it about at the proper time.

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Everything God does is good. Even the dangerous tools he works with are good. God saves by destroying. The first gospel promise he made was that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). He saved Noah and seven others by drowning the rest of the world in a flood. He saved Lot and his daughters by burning Sodom and Gomorrah. He rescued Israel from Egypt by killing the firstborn and drowning Pharaoh's army in the sea. There are several other examples in the Old Testament. Over and over again, God saved his people by destroying their enemies. All of these deliverance destructions foreshadowed the crucifixion of Jesus, where God the Father laid the sin of the entire world on his beloved Son and crushed him.

Because the big problem is not really outside of us. Your real enemy is your sin. My real enemy is my sin. And our sin is not just the bad things we do. That's a weak view of sin, and it's not true. If it were true, we could just stop doing the bad things, and we'd be fine. But our sin is our nature. It's who we are at our very core. So if God is going to save us, he's got to figure out a way to kill us without killing us. And if that makes any sense to you at all, you might just understand Baptism. Because that's what it is. It's dying in Jesus, without actually dying. It's a death that leads to life. So it is also being raised with Christ, spiritually now, and physically on the Last Day. That's Baptism. It's dangerous. And it's good. Praise God! Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.