

Epiphany 1, Year C
Collect; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Rev. Leslie Nunez Steffensen
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Problem in the Text

As we enter into St. Luke's Gospel today in celebration of the Baptism of our Lord, we find ourselves on the shores of the Jordan River with a large crowd listening to John the Baptist preach. St. Luke tells us that "the people were filled with expectation." I wondered what John the Baptist had said to them to get them hanging on his every word and ready to experience what would come next. I took a look back a few verses and he had just called them, "a brood of vipers." John had told them sternly that their status as children of Abraham wasn't going to save them and that the axe of judgement was ready to cut down any tree that doesn't bear fruit and toss it into the fire – they'd better "bear fruits worthy of repentance." That's some good preaching there! Yikes! (You can relax because that is a text for another day, no fire and brimstone for you yet...) But it did get the crowd thinking and anticipating that the Messiah was coming – and they began to hope *and* dread. This messianic message John preached was going to be a reckoning that was not for the faint-hearted. But it gave the crowd expectation: John the Baptist was bold in his preaching and he filled "the brood of vipers," the tax-collectors, soldiers, and the cheats with expectation that a new world order was coming and that it was possible for them to join in it. The crowd responded to the power of John's preaching and thought he might be the Messiah. But John let them know that he was not the Messiah. John answered all of them by saying, "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. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." The people were expecting fire.

Problem in the World

As I was beginning to prepare for this sermon, I read over the readings for today in full. My brain and I play a funny game sometimes, I don't know if this happens to you to, but my brain will sometimes misinterpret signs in funny ways. The world will fit and make contextual sense but won't be quite right. It's almost as if my brain likes to get "punny" with me. With today's opening collect we prayed, "Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior." I initially misread the collect for today as "bodily proclaim." I quickly took a second look at the words and it clearly said, "boldly proclaim." But then I thought of John the Baptist's bold aspect – the way he dressed and proclaimed his message in the wilderness.

His boldness was also a *bodily* proclamation of his faith and his task as the Messenger of the Lord. I imagine under Roman occupation, which was often brutal, the population tried to blend in, keep its head down, in order to avoid the notice of the Roman government. John the Baptist physically marked himself out as different from everyone else in very hostile territory. People of faith in our times can be living in places where it is hard to be Christian. Some suffer under the threat of anti-Christian movements: Islamo-fascists, Secularism, at worst the indifference I often see in the US. In places I've visited where Christians are the minority, I've seen two different reactions to living under threat.

In Zanzibar, the local Anglicans have suffered violence against them with churches being burned down and a government which tears down churches to build roads which are never built. They keep their heads down and try to find ways to work around the system which persecutes their tiny community and keeps them in fear.

In Egypt, I was at a shop and noticed the man behind the counter had a cross tattooed on the back of his hand, at the base of his thumb. I then noticed these more and more. I asked one gentleman about his tattoo, telling him first that I was also a Christian. He told me that the Coptic Christians get these tattoos when they are confirmed. That way they can never deny Christ, even under duress by their countrymen who are Muslim. They are physically permanently "marked" as Christ's own. The Coptic Community in Egypt is nearly a fifth of

the population and do wield economic clout as they are traditionally entrenched in the market system, but it interested me that they fear the fire of judgement they would encounter in denying Christ more than anything they might suffer for their faith in this world. How do we mark ourselves as “Christ’s own?” Where are we as faithful people on this spectrum of proclaiming Christ boldly and bodily in our lives in a world that is sometimes hostile, or even just indifferent?

Grace in the Text

Listening to John the Baptist, the expectation of the people must have mingled some dread with hope for the Messiah’s appearing in their hostile world. The Jews had been looking for salvation from a messiah who would deliver them from suffering and oppression. But Luke tells us that “when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The power and unquenchable fire John had proclaimed to the crowd appeared as a man, Jesus, praying quietly; a gentle white dove landing upon him; a voice saying the loveliest thing one could say to their child – a blessing that any of us would crave to hear: “You are mine, I love you; you make me so proud.” God sends to the world in the person of Jesus Christ an unquenchable fire that burns not for violence, but for peace. This is proclaimed boldly in Luke’s Gospel, and bodily. Jesus was baptized, his body submerged in the waters; he knelt in prayer at the side of the river, his body and life offered to serve God; the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and covered him; and then God blessed this man. Jesus appeared not as a warrior Messiah filled with wrath and vengeance, but as a man kneeling in prayer. Jesus boldly and bodily proclaimed God’s unquenchable fire which is not fear and oppression, but unconditional love and peace.

Grace in the World

One thing I love about our faith is that we participate in the event of Jesus’ baptism in our own baptisms. The baptismal event for us is not a remembrance but an actual on-going participation in what happened to Jesus. We are prayerfully baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in the certain hope that all of the elements of Jesus’ baptism are bestowed upon us. As we mark each movement, we are boldly and bodily asking for God’s grace in our baptism. We are submerged in the waters with Christ, we kneel in prayer with him at the side of the water, we look for the Spirit to descend upon us, and we ask for God’s blessing upon us of His unconditional love and peace. We become His children, anointed and marked forever.

Once the baptism is over, then what? How do we reflect what has happened to us in our baptisms in our lives and in the world? The collect says, “Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior...” What does “boldly proclaim” look like to you? Coptic hand tattoos are great if you are into that, but since I have a morbid fear of needles and tattoos, I would never tell you that it the way to go. I am wondering about the covenant we keep which sets us apart from the world. As participants in Christ’s baptism, perhaps we are called upon as Christ was, to mirror to others God’s unconditional love and peace and the open invitation to become a part of it. You may want to signal that this is what you are about in the world through wearing a cross or by slapping a bumper sticker on your car that says, “My boss is a carpenter.” But I have a feeling that most effective way that we proclaim Christ to the world is by our actions and by the way we encounter others on a daily basis.

If we carry Christ’s peace and unconditional love into every encounter with others in our lives, that will be the most effective way of boldly and bodily proclaiming to the world what it means the Messiah has appeared.

Amen.