

SERMON- Baptism of our Lord (C)

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~~Isaiah 43:1-7~~

Good Shepherd

January 9, 2022

~~Psalm 29~~

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

OPENING:

Previously on the pandemic, I participated in one of those birthday video compilations, wishing our very own Gail Calabrese, a happy (30th?) birthday. It was one of those things where you submit a short, minute-long greeting and then it's edited into this wonderful video.

Although I do not know most of Gail's friends, later I got a chance to see the entire video and watched the whole darn thing.

Gosh it was great.

Partly, I watched because it was COVID, and I was starving for what we usually see in person, and partly also because it highlighted the gifts of the remarkable Calabrese family and all their passion and joy

I mention that because,

there are a number of interesting things happening today in our service, that we will see and that we won't see.

One is the blessing of the wedding of James and Elise Calabrese, which will occur in a few minutes, will be a special and holy affair.

We are honored to have them today in person and blessed to see and experience this moment with them.

That having been said, judging by what the family was able to come up with for a video birthday compilation, I really wish that I could have been there for the full California wedding back in June! Where was my invitation?

Likewise, "we" (quote on quote) will "all" celebrate a Baptism today after the service, BUT, because of COVID, everyone will have cleared out, and the Kears family will join a skeleton crew to perform the Baptism.

You won't get to see that,

to keep them safe and to keep us safe.

God I wish we could all be there for that as well!

FAITH

Like so many things in COVID, we don't get to see all that we are used to.

So let me share a few of the things we are missing out on, some works of the Spirit, descending like a dove on the community of Good Shepherd.

Just this week, in the middle of ‘Snowmicron/ SNOWVID’... I saw something, this won’t surprise you, I got to see when Peg and John Morris cleared the driveways with snow plow and snow shovels—I won’t say who was using which—faithfully tending our grounds and making them safe.

I also got to see a parishioner (who will remain nameless) drive here on Monday, against his wife’s advice, to sign something for church business. His car got stuck in the grass, he could not get it out, he had to get a Tow. Everyone’s okay—let’s chalk that one up to the Holy Spirit.

What else have I seen?

We have children who are met this morning in SPARK/ Godly Play.

I got to see them in their pajamas, eating their cereal. This week, we are delivering more supplies to them, again because they must meet virtually.

They are not here, you can’t see them. But they are here.

In 2021, our youth group met, about 15 strong, every week, masked here in the church. We cleaned out the Youth room, we bought bean bag chairs, for crying out loud. Now we go back on ZOOM.

They might not be here, but know that they are here still.

Finally, and most amazingly, Atlas Ekhtafari, who was baptized a year or so ago here, again without congregation, had a baby, who was born two days before Christmas, born two hours after the mother was diagnosed with COVID. All are healthy.

I hope that baby can be baptized here in person with everyone someday!

Please know those things are happenings, that a child will be baptized right here in a few hours, you can’t be here, but you are here. I will tell the family as much, Know that James and Elise indeed had a wonderful celebration in the California summer, what you see here echoes that with its own beauty.

I know I have given elements of this sermon before, how COVID has prevented us from getting to be the Church, from being able to see one another.

So I echo that COVID lament and really what is the essence of any faith message: know that there are things happening in this world that you can’t see, but they are real, they are true, and so keep your eyes trained for them, your hearts open to when the heavens will open up and God’s Spirit will descend.

LAMENT

On our church staff here, this probably won't surprise you either, I am the resident optimist, laments are not really my thing, I am the person who always looks at things on the bright side, glass half full, see the best in people.

Christine rightfully makes fun of me for it.

But, even me, good time Charlie, told Christine at some point over the holidays: "I think our goal this Christmas should be getting through it, without killing one another."

All THAT brings us back to our Gospel reading, about the language that runs through all the lessons. In Luke, we read of the Spirit descending like a dove, at Jesus's baptism. Elsewhere we think of the Spirit as Wind.

But today, we also get FIRE.

"He will Baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John the Baptist says.¹

We don't think about "Fire" being associated with baptism. When we say "baptism by fire"—often that means going to war. There's a bad joke here about how Marriage is its own form of combat, its own baptism by fire.

Where's this "fire" coming from? What does it mean? Why do we need fire?

One can think Pentecost, which is a good inclination, but it made *me* think of Baptism and, specifically, the first thing we do in our Baptismal service, the first thing we will do them later together and then later still with this dear child, They are called the Renunciations, and it mean the first thing we will talk about, in the life of faith, is renouncing EVIL, renouncing Satan.

The first thing we do is "fight fire with fire" so to speak.

It's weird, frankly, and kind of jarring.

I, for one, don't really like talking about Satan and Evil.

It pops up in the Wedding service too a little bit, there's a prayer that reads:

"Defend them (the couple) from every enemy"

And then the repeated language in our wedding liturgy: "In their joys and in their sorrows"... "For better for worse"... "In this sinful and broken world"

I will go one step further, I was listening to a Podcast, an Episcopal one, again something that you would not expect to talk using this type of language. And it was

¹ Luke 3.16b

the typical COVID lament, talking about church and how much we lost. Then the host, who again does not usually talk like this, said something to effect of: “You know, sometimes I think, if the Devil... wanted to completely gut churches and make it impossible for people to come to church who needed it up with something to really hurt the church” the Devil would have constructed a virus that incubates over a certain time, where you can be symptomatic or asymptomatic, that hurts the elderly, that hurts the young. That disrupts our very national fabric and our common trust.

The Devil would have come up with Coronavirus.²

Strong words, I am not sure if I would use them precisely, although it’s consistent with New Testament language about evil and sin.

What do we have to face all that?

The Good News is that we are looking for the Holy Spirit to come, not just as a Dove, but as Fire.

The Good News is that we have the cleansing, purgative, regenerative, fire.

I get kinda scared when John talks about the winnowing fork and Jesus with fire.

But why? Who wants the chaff? Who wants a debilitating virus?

Come Holy Spirit come, come with Fire.

The Virus says “I am the Delta and Omicron”,

God says “I am the Alpha and the Omega.”

Again, in other words, we fight fire with fire

Sometimes, we don’t get to see it, there’s an example of this in the natural world, where some places vegetation grows and regrows via this low grade fire that fertilizes the soil and promotes new growth.

“The flame will not consume you.” And you will

“Walk through the fire” in the Old Testament Reading

Chrysostom meanwhile says “if you drink the true drink, true food, you will have life enough where you can come back from that table **like lions breathing out fire**, thus becoming terrifying to the Devil.”³

AMEN

² [Episode 220: Beauty, Betrayal, and Burnout - Mockingbird \(mbird.com\)](#) around 1 hour, 1 minute.

³ [CHURCH FATHERS: Homily 46 on the Gospel of John \(Chrysostom\) \(newadvent.org\)](#)