

Baptism of our Lord, Year C, Gospel

More Powerful Than Power

A new text study for The Baptism of Our Lord will be available soon. For now, enjoy this wonderful study provided for Year C by our own Ron Neustadt.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism of our Lord

Analysis by Ron C. Neustadt

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 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. 17 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."

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 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."



DIAGNOSIS: Loving Might

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Wanting a Powerful Messiah

The people were “filled with expectation,” Luke tells us. What they were expecting, it seems, was a messiah with some muscle. Some wondered whether John the Baptist might be the one. (After all, John was independent and fearless and willing to confront authority.) But even after John was long gone, folks still kept looking for a messiah with muscle. Remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus at the end of Luke? “We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel” (24:21).

So what’s new? Don’t we still often expect power to bring us a bright future? But we don’t mean the kind of power John was

talking about when he said that someone “more powerful” than he was coming. We mean “muscle power.” Even we Christians sometimes find ourselves in love with it and wanting more and more of it. Even we Christians find ourselves wanting more and more political / economic / military / medical / technological power.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Relying on Power

We turn to this kind of power because we have come to believe that it can “set us free.” Perhaps because this kind of power can do so much, and has done so much, we have come to trust it. We often expect it to do more for us than it can do. Even when it fails, we still put our trust in it. “We just need more power,” we think, and what we mean is “more money, more technology, more weapons, more political clout” for our agenda.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Getting Over-Powered

The trouble is, when it comes to setting us free (redeeming us), all this power we keep relying on is as useless as chaff. The military / economic / medical / technological / political muscle we like to rely on never gets us where we hoped it would. Worse yet, what can the One who is truly All-Mighty say to us but, “I’ve tried to make it clear that my steadfast love is the power I want you to trust, but if you insist on pinning all your hope on chaff, what future is there for you but to be “cleared away and burned?”

PROGNOSIS: RE: Mightily Loved

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Baptized with Holy Spirit and Fire

Even then, though, God is not content to have that be our future. So, like the widow (Luke 21:1-4) who “put in all she had to live on,” Jesus puts himself totally “in” for us. He begins by putting himself into the water. And his washing is just the beginning. The Holy Spirit that descends on him and fills him will lead him all the way into the fire—the very fire that we keep



inviting on ourselves by attaching ourselves so closely to chaff. From his baptism on, as Luke makes clear, Jesus goes wherever the Spirit leads him. He goes in order to bring God’s forgiveness to us, who have again and again chosen to rely on a different kind of power. It takes him into the fire because that’s what happens to chaff. And he gets burned.

At his washing, Jesus is assured that God is pleased with him for putting himself “all in” for us. At Jesus’ resurrection, so are we.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Relying on the Power of the Spirit

When God gets it through to us that we are so loved, we find ourselves trusting Jesus’ promise of forgiveness and relying on it for our futures rather than relying on worldly (muscle) power. Instead of thinking that we have to accumulate more and more power, we can be honest about its limitations and dangers. And, knowing that Jesus “put in everything he had” to promise us that there is nothing that stands between us and the life that God has for us, we can breathe free.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Living in the Power of the Spirit

So we end up living that life, at least for a time (until we need to hear the promise again and be filled again with the Spirit). When we trust Jesus' promise of forgiveness, we are freed to live as forgiven people do, putting ourselves into the service of others so that they, too, might breathe freely and live in the power of the Spirit.