

The Baptism of Our Lord

JESUS, THE MESSIAH WITH THE LIFE-GIVING SPIRIT

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John 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. 17His 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." 21Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and 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: Burning Chaff

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Expecting a Sensational Coming of the Lord*

People were glad to hear that God was finally coming. They were not surprised to hear God's coming described as a fire. God would blaze in from the desert, flames licking up all the mess of this world and incinerating it. Only those wet with the

purifying waters of baptism would survive. They were also not surprised that God's messenger, John, should have a fiery tongue, for God is the Judge and powerful Ruler of this world.

Many people today imagine a similar scene when they are told that God is coming. Some have even specified the year of God's coming: 2012. When asked what they would do if they knew God was coming tomorrow, the college students that I teach say they would "get right." We, too, expect an explosive appearance from God, bringing death and judgment against all who are not ready. People still throng in the thousands to churches and revivals where preachers warn them of the wrath to come.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Thinking That Our Repentance Is Sufficient Preparation*

John's hearers were so impressed with him that they thought he must be the one whom God would set on the throne, the Messiah, who would rule with justice and truth. For John was afraid of no one. But John insisted that he was not the Messiah. The Messiah would have the divine power to make a new creation. He would bring the Holy Spirit. John's baptism with water was an external demonstration of repentance and forgiveness, but it did not have the power to create a new person inside, much less a new world.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Learning That Internal Death-and-Life Transformation by God's Spirit Must Occur*

The Messiah would also bring fire, John said. John, too, expected the transformative work of the Messiah and his Holy Spirit to be violent. He pictured it blowing away and burning our protective husks and leaving us to be gathered in God's granary only after we are exposed and vulnerable. From Luke 3:10-14 it appears that in John's eyes our husks are mostly monetary. We shield ourselves with money. He advises preemptive action, telling his hearers to begin giving away their money,

possessions, and financial privileges. Then those who have something will know what it is to lose it. This is necessary because God always and only creates from nothing. If the powerful don't share it, God will tear it from their hands. God will burn the chaff in "unquenchable fire" (3:17), and we will be unable to get it back or to protect ourselves with it any longer. We will be only our raw selves in the hands of God, exactly like all the other brothers and sisters who are raw and vulnerable now.

PROGNOSIS: Saving Seed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Spirit's Quietly Infiltrating the Lives and Deaths of Sinners in the Life of Jesus, God's Son*

In all of this intensity, no one even notices when the Messiah arrives. Not even Luke tells us exactly when Jesus gets there. He simply came inconspicuously with the crowd, and was also baptized, inseparably from everyone else. There was no burst of flames when Jesus was baptized by John, only a dove and an assurance from God: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (3:22). Instead of coming from the outside in, God's Messiah rules from the inside out. John called the crowds out to the desert to repent of their sins. As we follow Jesus in Luke's gospel, he meets sinners, talks with them, goes into their homes, travels with them, touches them, so much so that Jesus is finally considered to be a sinner himself (7:54). Exactly. That is why Jesus went among the sinners to receive John's baptism in repentance. Later, like a sinner, his husk and all that he had was removed from him on the cross and he was like a naked grain of wheat. He was gathered into the tomb, the granary that finally holds all of us naked sinners. But then, on the third day, God made another stealthy move. Again, Jesus simply shows up, this time among the living. Jesus, God's beloved Son, has brought the Holy Spirit with himself, and where

the Spirit is, there is new life, even in the darkness of the granary. Jesus is, after all, a seed, God's own child.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Sharing Jesus' Life as God's Beloved Children*

Because Jesus has made himself look so much like us, God looks happily on all of the grains Jesus has gathered around himself and says to us, too, at our own baptisms, "You are my children, my beloved ones." Jesus brings us home, like the exiles to whom God made this promise: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you..." (Isaiah 43:1b-2, 4a). God's granary turns out not to be a storehouse for food that will be cooked and consumed. Rather, it holds living seeds to be planted, to sprout and grow, taking on a completely new form. This is the Messiah's incomparable creative power to save and renew God's world.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Being the Kingdom of God in This World*

So we live now as part of that new world, carrying within us the life that germinates even when we die. We do not need to buffer our lives with chaff. Like Jesus, we may share in the lives of other vulnerable sinners so that we are not distinguishable from them, not above them. We are God's stealthy kingdom in this world. Like Jesus, we are quietly planted among the people. We who know the Messiah in our midst can help others to turn their minds from visions of God's coming in pyrotechnics with the false hope or real despair such a vision brings, to the Savior whose Spirit, like Noah's dove after the flood, brings new life in her beak (Genesis 8:11).