

Come, Holy Spirit, come as the wind, and cleanse; come as the fire, and burn. Convict, convert, and consecrate our hearts, to our great good and your great glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Fire and water. Two forces which can be unbelievably destructive, yet we could not function if either one of them didn't exist.

Fire and water. Two forces which, along with earth and air, were once regarded as the four elemental building blocks of the universe.

Fire and water. Two forces associated with baptism in today's Gospel, one with the promise of John the Baptist, and one with the Baptism of Jesus as described by St. Luke.

God appears to Moses in a curious burning bush which produces flames but is not consumed. God leads the children of Israel through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Then then comes the Cecil B. Demille volcano on Sinai as God gives his people the Ten Commandments.

English words like "pure" and "purify" are, in fact, rooted in the Greek word for fire. The author of Hebrews echoes Deuteronomy in stating that "Our God is a consuming fire." Other references remind us that fire is used to remove impurities from gold and other precious metals, making fire a biblical metaphor for God's desire to burn away selfishness and greed from our hearts and minds.

Biblical images of fire. Fire as source of power. Fire as cleansing energy. Fire as source of light. Fire to guide God's people through the wilderness. Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Luke will combine these images again in the Book of Acts. As the Holy Spirit enters the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost, in fulfillment of Christ's promise that they will be "clothed with power from on high," (24:49) filling them with God's energy, and guiding them into God's truth, tongues of fire come to rest upon their heads.

In Baptism, we are filled with God's light to equip us to discern God's will and purpose in our lives and in our world, and with God's fire to boldly proclaim and advance the Reign of God, recognizing Christ in each other as we strive for justice and peace throughout the world.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit, who descended from heaven to rest on Jesus as he emerged from the waters of his own Baptism, and who descends on us to guide and empower us as we strive to carry out the work of reconciliation and restoration with which God has entrusted us, in the various environments into which God has sent us.

"We thank you, Lord, for the gift of water." These words will begin the Thanksgiving over the Water as we prepare it to wash a new disciple. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John, and was anointed by the Holy Spirit to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life."

The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John did not

invent Baptism; it was widely practiced in antiquity, and sites have been excavated that feature rooms full of bathtubs which, from documentation found at those sites, would have been used for ritual cleansing. It was a regular part of the discipline of many first-century communities of faith, of whom we are, directly or indirectly, the heirs.

So, why would Jesus, whom the Church teaches to have been utterly free of sin, come seeking a baptism of repentance?

The answer, I think, is twofold. First, it supports the Incarnation. “The sinless one to Jordan came,” states one of our hymns, “and in the river shared our stain.” Jesus identifies with our fallen humanity by accepting the baptism of John, as Jesus will identify with our fallen humanity on the Cross. On the third day we discover that he has thereby restored our humanity, and he takes it to heaven forty days later, and then he breathes his life and his power into our restored humanity, gathered to become his Church, by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Incarnation continues as the indwelling Spirit continues to guide and empower the Body of Christ, and its individual members, enabling us to carry forward the work entrusted to us in the Great Commission, confronting the powers of evil, binding up wounds, and building beloved community.

The second part of the answer lies in the definition of a sacrament; I quote the 1928 Prayer Book because I think more recent language obscures the meaning for our purposes here:

I mean by this word Sacrament the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given unto us, *ordained by Christ himself* as the means by which we receive that grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.

Ordained by Christ himself. By undergoing the baptism of John, Christ has established this ritual as the means by which we receive the inward and spiritual grace of the forgiveness of our sins, which are “washed away” by the waters of Baptism.

Our older liturgies were bolder in their application of these images. The Prayer of Humble Access, in language gone even from Rite I, asked that “our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood...”

Another concept that seems to have gone by the wayside is the remission of sins; most translations now speak of forgiveness. We tend to think of remission today as a temporary respite from degenerative diseases. But it can also refer to the cancellation of a debt or a penalty, like the reduction of a prison sentence.

The Greek word behind forgiveness as “remission” basically means “to send away.” “Let it go.” It is the word used of the first disciples as they walk away from their nets, leaving their old life behind.

Reflecting contemporary secular usage for remission of debts, this word is applied in the New Testament 34 times for God’s forgiveness of us and 11 times for God’s call for us to forgive one another, linking the two at the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus used that word when he taught us to pray, “forgive us our trespasses (or debts),” and then reflects on it in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, paralleled in a verse from Mark (11:25 REB): “And when you stand praying, if you have a grievance against anyone, forgive him, so that

your Father in heaven may forgive you the wrongs you have done.”

Let it go.

To use some much-quoted and often-misused Johannine language, in Baptism we are “born again.” Back in 1976 I was in my first ministry, at the NW edge of the Adirondack Park. It was a presidential election year, and Jimmy Carter’s status as a “born again Baptist” was prominent in the news. Many in the Church were anxious to distance themselves from that concept, along with “washing my sins away,” and one member of the congregation declared in no uncertain terms that she was *not* a born-again Episcopalian. I challenged that statement, pointing to the language of the Prayer Book, where we pray that “those who here are cleansed from sin and *born again* may continue for ever in the risen life of Christ our Savior.”

There was, and still is, a reason for the reluctance on the part of Episcopalians, and progressive Christians generally, to embrace language claimed by and generally associated with fundamentalism. Yet as we mark the life and ministry of Jimmy Carter at his passing, I cannot help reflecting on his bold assertion of his Christian faith to the very end; how he incorporated that faith in his exercise of power, living according the teachings of Jesus and the prophets; how he embraced Christian values in all things without waving the Cross in anybody’s face; how he comforted the afflicted whenever and in as many ways as he could, and he did not hesitate to afflict the comfortable when the need arose.

There are four occasions in the Church Year that have been identified as especially appropriate times for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism to be administered. Each occasion emphasizes one aspect of Baptismal grace. Today we gather to graft a child into the Body of Christ as Gloria Dei’s newest disciple. As we do so, this Feast of the Baptism of our Lord focuses our attention on how Jesus transformed the ancient ritual of Baptism into a Sacrament of the Gospel, claiming it for himself and for his Body for the washing away of sin, rooted in John’s baptism of repentance; and for the affirmation that we are beloved children of God, reflected in the voice from heaven proclaiming that affirmation for Jesus and passing it on to his Church, with the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove.

The Candidate for Holy Baptism will now be presented.