# Water, Fire, Spirit

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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January 10, 2016

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Acts 8:14-17

The passages we have read today all relate to baptism, and especially the baptism of Jesus. Do you see all the churning images of water and fire and spirit?

When we think of baptism we naturally think of water. We are “Anabaptist” and our movement began when several concerned Christians came to understand the rote baptisms of their infancy were of no effect, and they needed to be baptized again. And so they baptized each other in the home of Felix Manz in the city of Zurich, Switzerland.

Their baptism was simple, unpretentious, but they undertook it in great anxiousness of spirit, fearing God more than they feared the power of others. They knew what they would have to suffer for it.

When John was baptizing, he was baptizing at the river, and this image of flowing, living water enhanced the expectation and questions that people had about John. His baptism was only water, though, and he promised that another baptism was coming: a baptism of spirit and a river of fire that would burn up all the chaff of their lives, leaving the harvested wheat alone.

[W]hat John held out before his hearers was a baptism which was neither solely destructive nor solely gracious, but which contained both elements in itself. Its effect would then presumably depend on the condition of its recipients: the repentant would experience a purgative, refining, but ultimately merciful judgment; the impenitent, the stiff-necked and hard of heart, would be broken and destroyed[[1]](#footnote-1).

John stands in a powerful place, announcing this good news of baptism for those who need it, announcing that someone would come who did not need it. John, as spiritually centered and powerful as he was, was no match for the one who was coming.

And Jesus, the one, comes, and even he is baptized. And, as John promised, the Spirit came, and did what the Spirit always does: something wild and unexpected, part of the announcement that Jesus is the Beloved Son, the one who God is well pleased with.

In the life and teachings of Jesus, we continue to get images of water and fire and spirit. Jesus himself baptizes. He turns water to wine, meets a woman at a well. He promises the Spirit will come to replace himself after his death. And he baldly states that he came to bring fire to the earth.

As the church is born, in its early days, the Spirit is roiling and inconstant. The Spirit comes down like fire at Pentecost, and sometimes as people are baptized and sometimes, as in our passage from Acts, after some time. Peter and John go to Samaria to see what the Spirit is doing there. Remember that Samaritans were considered as bad Jews by the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem, but Jesus had promised that the early followers would bring the gospel there. And some Samaritans “accepted the word of God,” and had been baptized in Jesus’s name. But the Spirit had not come. But once Peter and John prayed for them the Spirit came in power over them.

All these churning images: water, Spirit, fire. What are we to do with them? David Handy notes that Paul asks the disciples in Ephesus in Acts 10, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And Handy wonders what our answer would be to this question[[2]](#footnote-2). It is a good question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit? Is the Spirit messing up your life, burning away what needs burning, and pouring life into what needs life?

I don’t quite know what to do with this question, in fact. But I am reminded of this story from the desert hermits, as translated by Thomas Merton:

Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire?[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Dunn, James D G. "Spirit-and-fire baptism." *Novum Testamentum* 14, no. 2 (April 1972): 81-92. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed January 9, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Handy, David A., "Between Text and Sermon: Acts 8:14-25," Interpretation, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Merton, Thomas (1970-01-17). The Wisdom of the Desert (New Directions) (p. 50). New Directions. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)