

Going to Town -- Pentecost C

I baptize you with water, but the one who comes after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire! This was the preaching message of John the Baptizer, as the people of Jerusalem and all the people of Judea came out to be baptized in the Jordan confessing their sins. But who wants to be baptized with fire?

We cling to this metaphor as something extra special, special enough to celebrate on its own festival day, today, the Day of Pentecost. But a baptism by fire in any other context means a rude awakening, a slap in the face, a cold shower, like being sent out on the trail before you really know how to ride a horse.

When I was sixteen, Howard Dixon, the noble Indiana farmer I was working for one summer asked me if I could drive a pickup: stick shift; three on the tree. He wanted somebody to go to town for a tractor part as I recall. Being a little hard of hearing, or a lot old school or both, when I said "No," he said "Good – Go into Rushville and pick up that p.t.o. schackle's waiting for me at Crider's."

It being July, the weather was more than a little warm on a Midwest hog farm. And although the well water was very sweet and plentiful, there just never seemed to be enough of it to cool you off until quitting time. Much as I liked my job of operating a one row manual cultivator -- a hoe – cutting hogs and haying, the prospect of an hour tooling down 52 to Rushville and back with the windows open and Delta Dawn and Brandy on the radio was mighty

tempting. So I waited 'til he went back in the house before setting off, coughing and bucking and stalling down the driveway, and enjoyed an hour and a half of yee-ha in the middle of a long hot summer of soo-eee. Baptism by fire indeed.

Throughout our history with the God we hear about in the Bible, the God of Sarah and Hagar and Abram, of Rebekah and Leah and Rachel and Jacob; throughout the long, complicated, magnificent flow of stories we know as our salvation history, the great milestones have been the covenants God has made with humankind.

There are the two big covenants: The one with Noah and the one on Pentecost. The ones in between are far from trivial: Abraham is promised children numbered like the stars for his obedience; Moses is promised special status for him and all his people in exchange for their obedience. David is promised permanent royal status for his house and lineage. But these three all have more to do with circumstances and behaviors that separate God from humanity, and they all have conditions attached. The two biggies, the bookends, the alpha and the omega promises that align us with God permanently and unconditionally are the one with Noah (water) and the one through Jesus (the Holy Spirit Fire).

Never again will I use my power to destroy humanity – no matter what. That's what God says to Noah after the big baptism, the Flood. Nature does indeed continue to include death and destruction but it is never a result of angry divine retribution. People are the ones who get mad and go

mad and will violence. Nature does indeed kill, but only people murder.

In the person of Jesus, God made an equally unconditional and permanent promise: "I am sending another advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom you know, who abides within you." We receive the same kind of spirit God's very self wields, the spirit of reconciliation and healing among all people: the power to carry out miracles of lovingkindness, if only we will use it.

Again, as with Noah's offspring, God insists that people be fruitful and multiply and diversify. Some of us are apples, some mushmelons; some of us are starfruit, some persimmons; over here's a tangerine, outside you'll find a loquat, and up in Cambria, they've got olalieberries. What would the World be if there were only figs? And don't get me wrong, I like figs. God isn't angry, just pointing out that the world won't work without a successful mixture all us different kinds of fruits. We are still a long way from meeting Creation's criteria of gracious acceptance and celebration of one another.

Today at Pentecost we are bidden to hit the reset button on diversity, and revive our awareness of the Spirit within us. We celebrate the truth that all God's children have equal status and equal access to the power of that Spirit; all have access to baptism by fire. At Pentecost, we get a glimpse of original perfection, like the face of a child in the moment of a lightning flash. Pentecost is the time God reminds us we have all been given the same fire of

compassion just before we exploded into the glorious diversity of nature. It is our fuel, our passion and the compass that can lead us home.

God would have us know that we are individuals meant to be both diverse and unified. We are not meant to make names for ourselves, but to learn the names of others; to call each other by those names – not ones we make up to denigrate them – and to celebrate the glowing warmth of Spirit that moves us to offer our singular and humble care to the rest of the fruits, whoever they may be.

So what is this baptism by fire that John the Baptist is proclaiming will be coming after him, John uses water, and this other one the Holy Spirit and fire? We come to know this one to be Jesus when the Spirit descends like a dove upon him just as he comes out of the water and a voice from heaven proclaims, “This is my child, my beloved. Listen to him!”

People continued to be baptized with water – we are baptizing away to this day – just show up and ask and we will baptize you -- only a few questions asked. But with water, not fire. We will not throw you in the deep end or make you enter in the bullride.

It is a scary thing, the power we have been given: the power of forgiveness. “What if it doesn’t feel good?” “What if I just get hurt again?” “What if I get burned?” Well this firepower is so hot that if you use it properly, nothing can ever burn you. It’s massive and awesome. You’ve got to love Peter’s sales pitch: “Indeed, these are not drunk, as

you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this must be what was spoken through the prophet!"

In a vastly diverse world, the world after what happens at the Tower of Babel, it is only with this kind of spirit that we have any hope of getting along. After the flood, Noah's sons are told to be fruitful and multiply. So each fathers a tribe and each tribe has its own language. Scholars tell us that the Flood story comes from a different stream of stories than the Babel story we heard today. (If they all had different languages already, then the Babel story doesn't make much sense.) Both of these stories are trying to make sense of a diverse world.

In Babel, everyone is speaking the same language and trying to curl up like cultural roly poly bugs to avoid all change. 'We'll build us a big brick tower and just be pure.' But God – as Nature -- will have none of that. He ain't mad, he's just sayin': 'The World won't work; the world won't last without all us different kinds of fruits caring about each other.' Not only that, such a starved and narrowminded world would be -- let's face it -- dull as proverbial ditchwater.