

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

We have water, wind and fire in all of our readings this morning. Sounds like some of the news from last year, devastating floods, tornadoes and forest fires across the nation. In our first reading from Isaiah, the prophet refers to water, fire, rivers and he's talking about God's exiled people returning to Israel. In our Psalm, the "voice of the Lord" is over waters, mighty waters, his voice "flashes forth flames of fire," and the Lord's voice "causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare." In our second reading from Acts, people from Samaria "received the Holy Spirit." And of course in our gospel reading we have water, the Holy Spirit and fire, all in reference to baptism.

In the history of Israel, it seems like salvation has depended upon going through the flood, there's been a double edged symbolism of water stories in the OT, and in the references in Charlotte's baptism. We have Noah's flood, and a "form like a dove" in our gospel story of Jesus' baptism. In the Noah story only eight people are saved, and our gospel features the salvation of humanity in Jesus. Our reading from Isaiah refers to Exodus from Egypt, think of the Israelites crossing safely yet their pursuers are trapped in the waters. John the Baptizer was baptizing in the Jordan River, which had been a barrier between the people in the wilderness and the Promised Land, a river in which now John has been baptizing and calling on the people to repent and turn from their sins. John speaks of a sign of death but also life and cleansing.

John also speaks of fire. Isaiah had spoken of the people walking through fire and not being consumed and in our gospel, John uses image of fire as the way God sorts out the good from the bad. The Messiah will be greater than himself John tells his listeners, saying, "I baptize you with water... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

But Jesus has yet another baptism to go through. He would eventually be linking this baptism with his coming death at the hands of the religious leaders of the time who thought they were doing the right thing. "Can you be baptized with the baptism into which I am to be baptized?" he asks his disciples.

Then on the Day of Pentecost 3,000 are baptized with the Holy Spirit, there's wind and tongues of fire. But not the fires of judgment, these tongues of fire empower the disciples to share God's message of salvation to those who had come from the east, the west, the north, the south, from nations Isaiah said God was ready to sacrifice to accomplish the return of his chosen people. And the wind identified by our psalmist as "voice of the Lord" that can strip forests bare, becomes the energy of God that send the Apostles out into the streets to proclaim God's message of salvation for all people.

Baptism with fire becomes a sign of reconciliation, of love that crosses every boundary, every border. Our brothers and sisters in this Christian Church are not

restricted within boundaries or by walls to keep out immigrants and refugees. We see that in our reading from Acts where Peter and John go to complete the baptism of Samaritan believers, that the Samaritans might receive the same Holy Spirit as the Apostles received. Samaritans of course are the enemies of the Jews, but reconciliation takes place in the Holy Spirit's baptismal work of bringing these two peoples together into the one community of Jesus.

Baptism of course is not a guarantee from the hazards of life in this world. We instead plunge right in to them through the waters of our baptism. We are called to follow Jesus out of our comfort zones, into the danger zones, the flames of hostility, we pass through the deep waters of death and burial, rising again in the waters of our baptism to new life, eternal life, in Christ Jesus.

The word of the Lord through Isaiah said, "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." God will not fail us in this, floods and the flames, death and burial will not have the last word. Salvation comes in the waters of rebirth and in the winds and fires of God the Holy Spirit and new life flourishes.

Amen.