

# Fire and Water

*A sermon on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 by Nathan Nettleton, 9 January 2022*

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## Message

The promise of baptism with fire may surprisingly lead us to a loving suffering messiah.

## Sermon

One of the most enjoyable and sometimes most difficult things about human communication is the way we use language to evoke associations that remain otherwise unspoken. We do this all the time. A few words can call to mind a whole bunch of other details and so paint a bit of a picture that communicates far more than the few words themselves. This is one of the secrets of poetry. The poet is particularly skilled at getting a few words to communicate far more than the dictionary definitions of each word would add up to.

There are some dangers with this though, and negotiating them can sometimes be a bit tricky. You see, the person who speaks or writes the words can not control what associations will be evoked for the hearer or reader. I'm sure you've all had the experience of saying something completely innocuous, and being mystified as to why the colour drained from your hearer's face and they turned their back and walked away. Preachers face this danger all the time, but so does anyone who seeks to communicate with others.

You can't know what memories will be awoken by your words. Perhaps you were just musing on what a great time you had flipping through the family photo albums yesterday and reflecting on how much poorer your life would be without such a record. You weren't to know that your conversation partner, who you had only met that day, had two years ago had a house fire that not only destroyed all their photo albums, but killed the beloved child who had featured in the photo albums. Communication is fraught with such dangers, and mistakes are unavoidable, but communicate we must.

The fact that language partly works by evoking associations is why it is important to understand the context in which something is said. Athol Gill used to begin teaching first years students about interpreting the Bible by holding up a newspaper banner that said "Demons devour Saints". In Melbourne, of course, we all recognise it as being about football. But Athol asked us to imagine what that banner might communicate to its readers if it was stuck outside a newsagent in another country where spiritual warfare was part of the everyday world view.

Or think of how we react to reports of rain. Much of the time if someone says it is going to rain tomorrow, we say, "Oh well, there will be better weather soon." But when we are in the midst of a drought, as we often are in this country, if someone says it's going to rain tomorrow, we all go, "Fantastic! May there be lots of it. We so need it!" But if the drought breaks and it rains everyday for a month, we'd greet the same news with a glum look and a wish for a bit of break from it.

Or think about fire. At this time of year, if a farmer with a sweaty brow and black smudges on his face tells you he is going home to a raging fire, you'd respond by saying "Oh, you poor bugger; we'll be praying for you." But in the middle of winter, when it is cold and damp and miserable, if I tell you I'm going home to a raging fire, you'll think "well lucky you!"

David Ranson, who is a monk from the Tarrawarra Abbey at Yarra Glen says that in this part of Australia, the changing meanings of fire and water are the essential elements to our perceptions of the nature of the annual seasons. Spring flowers and autumn leaves are not a feature of our native vegetation. We import their images from elsewhere. For us, in summer fire means oppressive threat and water means relief and replenishment, while in winter, rain means gloom and oppressiveness and fire means comfort and shelter.

By now, you may be starting to work out where I am going with this long introduction. Fire and water, and what do they mean. In today's gospel reading, John responds to the people's speculations about whether he might be the Messiah by saying, "I baptise you with *water*; but one who is more powerful than I is coming. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and *fire*. His 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*."

Clearly, John expects us to understand something by his use of fire imagery. He is evoking images and understandings that already existed in the minds of his hearers. But we need to check that we don't just assume that we know what it means, because the images evoked by fire in the middle of the bushfire season in south eastern Australia in the twenty first century are not necessarily those evoked on the banks of the Jordan River in Israel two thousand years ago.

And it is also quite possible, because it happens a lot, that John had one set of meanings in mind, but that Jesus and the gospel writer, Luke, take his images and give them a new twist that would have surprised John.

It is not uncommon to hear John referred to as a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher. All this talk of "baptising with fire" and the "winnowing fork is in hand," and "the chaff" being burnt "with unquenchable fire." Ask most people, including most of us here, what fire images are being evoked, and the fires of hell will probably come top of the list.

We Aussies might think of devastating bushfires, but we use them as an image of the fires of hell, so we end up in the same place anyway. But does Jesus see himself, and does Luke see Jesus, as one who unleashes the fires of hell? Many of us have been raised on frightening images of a God who is only too ready to cast us into the fires of hell given half an excuse, so the image of Jesus as fiery judge may seem right, but are we perhaps allowing the wrong associations to be evoked?

Is it not instead the case that the fire Jesus sees himself as coming to bring to the earth is the fire of love, and perhaps even more specifically, the fire of suffering love? Not the fires of hell at all, but the fiery passion of God's fierce and blazing love for the world and all who inhabit it.

This is not a soft option that weakens the force of John's imagery. The fire of love is not without threat. No matter how carefully we have installed our fire breaks, the fire of God's love does jump the containment lines and incinerate all that is false and corrupt. But this is not for the purposes of judging and condemning us, but for the purposes of purifying us and liberating us to be all that we were created to be. It is about setting us free to glory in the consuming love that God feels for us.

The images of water did something similar for those who heard John and Jesus speak of baptism. The Hebrew people were not a water loving mob. Water was always associated with dangers, with storms and monsters and the threat of death. But look at the double edged symbolism of water in their sacred stories. Noah's flood, a story evoked by the presence of the dove in the baptism story, is both a story of the threatened annihilation of the world, and a story of the salvation of humanity and the animal kingdom through the ark.

The Red Sea first stood for the being trapped between the threat of drowning and the threat of a hostile army, but it becomes the image of salvation as God opens a way of safety that goes right through the waters to the safety of the promised land.

The Jordan River too had stood as a barrier between the people wandering in the wilderness and the milk and honey of the promised land, but it too becomes a place where God opens a way of salvation, and a safe journey to the new homeland.

Just as they are with fire and water in our Aussie consciousness, the threat and the salvation are both present in the same symbols. Jesus is not the bringer of hellfire and damnation, but the bringer of the fire of love that frees us from the hellfire and damnation of our own making.

I wonder too, whether there is another mistake commonly made in the associations of this story. When the voice comes from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," it has been common to point to Psalm 2:7 as the origin of these words. It is a coronation hymn, and so the association would portray Jesus as a new king in the royal line of King David. But there are other options.

The words from heaven also sound like Isaiah 42:1, the beginning of Isaiah's first Song of the Suffering Servant: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights." That association would not lead us to a powerful king, but but to the servant who is despised, rejected, lynched, and cut off from the land of the living. Or similarly, the words from heaven could evoke Genesis 22:2, where God calls Abraham to take his only son, the son whom he loves, and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. Perhaps, as I suggested some week's back on the feast of Christ the King, all these images are being played with so as to completely deconstruct our understanding of what God's chosen king might be, so that the cross and the throne become one and the same in the dangerous love of our God.

We stand here at the beginning of a new year, wary of fire and relishing cool water, and we hear these stories of the beginning of a new age in Jesus. His baptism marked the beginning of a new revelation of who God is. This little story is one of the most crucial revelations of the nature of God, of a God who is loving father, suffering son, and the fire of love between them, the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry, his defiant march into the fires of hostility and hatred, disarming their power, and unleashing his own Spirit, his fire of love in the world. And so as we recall his baptism today, and as we, week by week, celebrate our own immersion into his baptism, let us rejoice in our own knowledge of being gathered into the fiery love of Father, Son and Spirit, so fully that we too are sent into the world with the fire of

love, and with those words from heaven ringing in our ears and written on our hearts: “You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.”