

**“Where There Is Smoke...”**  
**The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ January 12, 2025**  
**Isaiah 43:1-7, John 2:1-11**

Do you remember your baptism? If you were baptized as a baby, you probably don't. But I bet that if you were baptized as a baby, you have some pretty early memories about being raised in the church.

You might remember some Sunday school teachers who taught you about the Bible. There may even be some snippets from some sermons you remember.

We celebrate infant baptism because we believe that there is a grace that goes before us. We believe that God is working in our lives from the time we are born to bring us to the point in our lives where we accept God's free gift of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ for ourselves and become children of God.

When a baby is baptized, his or her parents make a vow to God before the church. They promise to nurture their child in Christ's Holy Church, that by their teaching and example their child may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life.

And the church makes a promise to God and to the parents of this child. “With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround this child with a community of love and forgiveness, that this child may grow in his or her service to others. We will pray for this child.” For many of us, this is our first initiation into God's Church... the beginning of an amazing journey. And it is the foundation upon which our lives are built.

For in Christ, we are never homeless... we are always surrounded by God's grace and love. God is the One who initiates that love, and the Church is the body of Christ called to live out that love on earth.

Now, if you were baptized as a Youth or adult, that means that you made the decision to dedicate your life to Jesus Christ, and your baptism was an outward sign of the decision you made and the conversion you experienced... that you have been born of God.

We do not believe that infant baptism saves us, but we do believe it is a sign of God's grace going before us until we can make the decision to accept Christ for ourselves. Neither do we believe that adult baptism saves us. Baptism is not an

insurance policy to get us out of hell when we die. And we don't believe in baptizing people more than once.

With that behind us, let's look at our Gospel Lesson for this morning. The crowds who came to hear John preach and to be baptized wondered if John was the messiah. John said he wasn't, but another was coming Who will "baptize... with the holy spirit and fire."

Now what in the world does that mean? Let us look again at verse 17 of our Gospel Lesson. This is a heavy passage, and it has several meanings. One of the meanings is that it is a picture of the present reality of the saved and unsaved living side by side in a fallen world. Those who repent are born again and become the children of God. Those who do not repent and accept Christ as Lord of their lives will experience the judgment of fire.

And our job is to live lives that are in step with the Holy Spirit ... allowing the Holy Spirit to direct our actions, our thoughts, and to create us more and more each day into the image of Christ.

It is the job of the saved to shine as God's light in this world of darkness...

...to proclaim the salvation that only comes through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ...

...to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything' Christ has commanded.

Are we doing our job?

People react to me that just because I am a pastor, that I must have it all together and I am perfect. Some think that I can walk on water. Those who really know me, know that it is not true. But I am always taken back when someone says to me, "But you have dedicated your life to Christ. You are a preacher."

"Yes," I said, "but I have so much farther to go. There's so much more I should be doing. There's so much more of me I need to commit to Christ." "I know I'm not nearly the Christian that God wants me to be. I haven't even come close to arriving."

But, my friends, that is one of the things that makes the Christian journey so exciting. There is always more that we can do. There is always something that

needs to be refined...something in us that needs to be burned away...something that still stinks of the world and our sinful nature.

This is called the process of sanctification. It is the process of being made perfect. It is something we will never achieve here on this earth... but it is what we are to strive for...

...and the more we strive...

...the more Christ enters in...

...the more we change...

...and the better life gets.

This is another thing that John means when he says that Jesus Christ will “baptize... with the holy spirit and fire.”

As the Prophet Malachi prophesies in Malachi chapter 3: “Who can stand when He appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify...and refine them like gold and silver.”

What a great privilege. What a loving God! Are we being refined? Are we allowing God to refine us like silver and gold? Well, where there is smoke, there is fire! Where is the smoke in your life? In my life, that indicates that the fire of the Holy Spirit is at work in my life.

Do we desire more and more to be made in the image of Christ? Are the things of this world becoming less and less important to us? Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness? Are we reading our Bibles daily... being fed by spiritual food that does not perish? Are we putting our faith into action?

...by listening to the Holy Spirit as God prompts us to tell others about the salvation which comes through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ...

...inviting others to join us at church...

...becoming more and more involved with our brothers and sisters in the faith...

...attending Sunday school...

...worship services...

...Bible study...

...giving more and more of our time and money to God’s work here on earth...

...and loving our neighbors as ourselves?

Those of us who have been baptized “with the holy spirit and fire” need not ever feel like orphans... like unwanted or unclaimed children. Because we are wanted and loved and cherished so very, very much. We are all wanted and loved and cherished by God—the Author of Life—and the Author and Finisher of our faith.

God’s grace is being offered to all people, and it is our job to love all people into His kingdom. I was loved into His kingdom. I am thankful for my baptism. How about you? Amen.