

Denice K. Leslie
Baptism of the Lord
Isaiah 43: 1 – 7
Luke 3: 15 – 17, 21-22

A God of New Life: Coming Clean

I was gifted with some wonderful bath salts at the Thrift Shop's annual Christmas party this year called "Unwind." They have a wonderful aroma and make taking a soak in the tub a real pleasure!

Speaking of soaking in the tub, several years ago I stopped by the Stoddard household for some reason long forgotten. It was early evening, and as I approached the house I heard voices coming from the bathroom window.

I stopped in my tracks as I heard Tammy and Tim engaged in conversation with their three little red-headed boys. They WERE little then! It was clearly bath time and as I listened I realized I was eaves dropping in on a private moment of domesticity but I was too humbled and entranced to make myself move back to the car as I heard "Its time to get washed up from the day and get pj's on"— and what would they like to sing as they washed up?

And then there was singing. Dad's voice, mom's voice and the children's voices altogether! It was one of those rare moments of eternal life in which the fullness and wholeness and well-being God has in mind for everyone on this planet was present. Chronological time had stopped as God's Kairos time took hold. I gave a silent prayer of thanksgiving for the blessing I had received and decided my errand could wait until another day as it would be virtual sacrilege to interrupt.

In today's gospel lesson from Luke on the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, John the Baptist comes proclaiming to one and all that its time to wash up—time to come clean because God is on the move and is sending One who will baptize as well—but with the Holy Spirit and with fire! Sounds ominous doesn't it? A far cry from candlelight and aroma therapy in the tub

with bath salts or a family's nurturing moments at bath time.

But not really. They have a lot in common for us this day. You see when Jesus goes down to the river to be baptized and comes up out of the water, he gets a message strong and clear that he is God's beloved son. This is a kairos moment—a moment of nurturance and loving embrace. Only the warmth of the moment is accentuated by a special gift—the gift of the Holy Spirit. The anointed one of God will baptize with the Holy Spirit but also with fire. That scary sound again.

John tells us the Anointed One of God has his winnowing fork in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary but to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Any of you remember burning the trash out back as kids? Sure seems like that's what John says God has in mind here, doesn't it?

I mean when I hear this old desert prophet bellowing about fire and winnowing the chaff from the grain I hear separating the sheep from the goats!

The beginning of a new year is a good time to take stock—place ourselves before God and see how God sees us. Figure out what the chaff is in our lives and what is the kernel of the grain. Take inventory. Maybe make a list of our foibles, lack of charity toward our neighbors or family for that matter! Confess to our self-indulgences. And look at our serious abuse of life and its gifts.

And I'm not just talking about being in denial about how much chocolate we managed to stuff away over the holidays or our lack of self-discipline to get out and exercise on these below freezing mornings.

No, I mean more serious things like giving up on our marriage relationships-- getting involved with someone else. Spreading serious and injurious gossip because it makes us feel superior and is an indirect way to hurt somebody we think doesn't deserve what they have. Cutting off a family member—maybe we did it years ago and now its just one of those

rock like things in our life we can't seem to budge loose and still save face. Or maybe it's a porn habit we wouldn't dream of labeling an addiction because after all we are in control of our lives...or is it gambling at one of the casinos. Again, we are in control, right? This isn't a problem—not really. Or flying off the handle with our temper—of course it's not our fault—the kid or the wife or the husband or the old so and so pushed me too far---it's their fault. It won't happen again even though it's happened more and more frequently—but we live under a lot of stress right? And I didn't drink so much after all. I can stop at any time.

Or helping ourselves to things at work the employer will never miss and since we work so many additional hours or didn't get that deserved raise we have a right to take a little here and there or spend a little more here and there and write it off as a business expense.

I mean you fill in the blank. Denial is strong. Until we are confronted by the fact that nothing we do is unobserved. We can lie to others, we can lie to ourselves, we can live in denial. But God sees.

So what am I saying? That we are all condemned to hell for our sin? That's the way we do it, isn't it? We weigh the evidence. Find the verdict of guilt or innocence and pass judgment. If the verdict is guilty we dish out the punishment. Time to pay. We call it justice. God calls it crap.

You heard me. Fertilizer. Good for lawns and bushes and such. Doesn't do anything for people. Except satisfy our need for retribution.

God works differently. God knows. And God is no fool. God doesn't condone our stupidity, ugliness towards others or injury of ourselves or our victimization of others. And God knows that if the desired end result is other than "just deserts" another way is called for.

So God's not in the punishment business for punishment's sake. Because punishment doesn't go far enough. I mean look at the recidivism rate for folks who go to jail. It isn't exactly encouraging. Paying ones debt to

society isn't much of a deterrent. It's a well known, documented fact that the death penalty is not a deterrent. It is society's way of exacting re of getting even. Of removing the problem. It works as far as it goes—from our perspective. But it doesn't stop others from falling in behind.

God knows this. So God's interest is different. God's interest is in effective change.

God's in the restoration business. And don't read cheap grace into that. God's no patsy either. We reap what we sow in more than one way.

God simply expects a better return on investment. Throwing people away because we've been arrogant, self-centered, or evil is a huge loss of expensive resource.

I mean consider the investment God has in you. We talk a lot about the foreseeable benefits of stem cell research. Did it ever occur to you that YOU ARE THE RESULT OF GOD'S STEM CELL RESEARCH? We are all so bent on recreating it so that when things go awry we can recreate what God did—do we stop long enough to acknowledge the incredible miracle of the original—no we take it for granted.

I took up skating a few months back. But I just forgot one important thing: I'm a whole lot further away from the ground than when I was when I was seven. First step onto the pavement outside my door with my new skates was my last—the next thing I knew I was flat on my back and completely numb through the lower back and buttocks. Took four months to unthaw and the tail bone—well it hurts! Never had any problems before. I appreciate that back and tail bone now!! Any way....

You are as precious as any gem stone in the economy of God's creation. Do you know that? Precious enough to risk God's all. As in to die for. I don't know of any human being who would die for a thief, murder, or merciless dictator. Or a porn addict, alcoholic, physical abuser, or thief. No one except Jesus.

That fire Jesus comes with—we assume it's the fire of hell. Unquenchable eternal fire.

Wrong. The only unquenchable fire is the Fire of God's Love. The fire of hell is our own desire for sacrifice and retribution and the victimization of others. We dish it out in evil ways and then enshrine the same stuff—make it official—and call it justice when we use it as punishment.

Now I'm not talking about what we deserve here. But maybe I'd better do that right now. We all deserve to be brought up short. There isn't a one of us here who hasn't done evil in our hearts. Just because we've managed to keep it there instead of shooting somebody or abusing somebody or whatever is no excuse when we stand before the goodness of God.

As Jesus tells us in the gospels, if we lust after someone in our hearts it's no different than the act. So should we, as Paul says, sin boldly in order to receive God's grace? By no means, says Paul—it is simply that we need to RECOGNIZE our capacity for living misdirected lives—our fallen ness and our need to come clean before God. The comparison here is not between you and me. Its between me and God. Ouch.

Baptism is about coming clean. It's not about drowning as a punishment. Or water boarding. Those are things WE creatures think up. God's ways are not our ways. Thank God. But we can buy in to God's ways. We can choose to die to our old selves and to be raised up as new people in Christ.

We can surrender ourselves to God's ways and in so doing find an unexpected gift: Freedom. New life. A new beginning. Change of heart, change of attitude, change of behavior—transformation or Resurrection. Call it what you want. I call it the Way Out-In. The way out of my creaturely limitations and the way in to productive, meaningful, life giving living in community.

I call it joy--. As in life lived from God's perspective. How do I get that perspective? I get it from following Jesus. I personally haven't found any other way.

Money doesn't do it. Health is nice but doesn't last. Defined benefit pension plans are a thing

of the past. Disease knows no class, doesn't care if you have health insurance. Kids grow up and leave home. I only know one person who shows me the way home to my best self—to the way God means for life to be.

Jesus came down to the river to take a dip because he wanted to stand in solidarity with us as our true human brother. He knows what its like for us because he is one of us. This is his way of letting us know he's with us all the way. And to let God know he would go all the way—willingly be the sacrifice, the victim for us in order to reveal once and for all that violence is violence. It doesn't work. The only thing that will work is God's love.

So let me make this clear—it isn't about Jesus being the sacrifice that GOD demands. This is where we really get confused. God never demands retribution or sacrifice. It's about Jesus agreeing mutually with God to be the sacrifice that WE demand—choosing to walk through the fire of our evil ways in order to vanquish with the unquenchable power of love.¹

Talk about separating the chaff from the wheat! Talk about a baptism of the Holy Spirit. There is no other way to make it clear. And it's something we can't do for ourselves—only God can initiate for us. What it really takes is God showing us another way. Turning our demand for violence into a sacrifice of love and forgiveness, reconciliation and grace. Turning our sin into our salvation.

And giving it to us as a gift—a replenishing, overflowing gift of forgiveness and unconditional love for us. Once we see it, once we are willing to come clean with ourselves before God we can put the fire of our sin out through the waters of baptism—and drown that old self.

We can rise up clean and new—like a new baby birthed fresh from the womb: we are given a new day, a new lease on life, a fresh

¹ Rene Girard commentary from Textweek.com for the lections for 1/7/07 Baptism of the Lord.

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start and a new commission: to join with Christ in showing the world the unquenchable fire of God's love.

FWS # 2251 "We Were Baptized in Christ Jesus"

What do you need the fire of God's unquenchable love to burn out of your life? What do you need to come clean about before God? What do you need to drown in order to receive God's grace? Take a few moments to examine your life. (Pause) Let us pray: Most Holy God, we come before you aware of our need. We stand helpless before you in need of your rescuing love. The ball and chain of where we've been drags us down. We confess our need and ask for your forgiveness. Reach out your hand and lead us forward from the love of the cross into the resurrection of a new day---break our chains that we may recommit our lives to you, that we may rise up strong and proud and new—your person committed to walking your way with our brother Jesus leading the way. Amen.

Please turn in your hymn book to page 51.

(Reaffirmation of Baptism: Call Tim Stoddard forward for his reaffirmation and read his statement.. Then walk among the pews with branch and water bowl for reaffirmation.)

Tim Stoddard stands before you as a disciple of Jesus who has examined his life, found it wanting, and who desires to come clean through the renewal of his baptismal vows.

As I address the baptismal vows to Tim, I address them to us all. Let us be here in solidarity with our brother in Christ as we renew our baptismal vows remembering Jesus went to the Jordan to be baptized in solidarity with us....for WE are the Body of Christ, cleansed by his blood and renewed by his grace.