



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Living into Jesus' Baptism

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Oh God, our great companion, lead us ever more deeply into the mystery of your life and ours, and make us faithful interpreters of life to one another.  
Amen.

When I looked at today's gospel reading I was stunned. The passage gives us Luke's version of Jesus' baptism, but just before that, we have John the Baptist describing Jesus as the one who will baptize with fire, with winnowing fork in hand to separate the wheat from the chaff and to burn that chaff with unquenchable fire. The reason I was stunned (besides the scary image of Jesus as the ultimate winnowing) was because that part of the passage was part of the gospel passage on Dec. 16, just four weeks ago, when I also was the preacher! What? The winnowing, the chaff burner, again? Why me? What more can I say about that?

But when I read the passage from Isaiah, I got curious. It is in such contrast with the way John the Baptist portrays Jesus in the gospel. Here there is no judgement but rather a God who loves God's people, whom he has made for himself and for his glory and whom he will redeem at great cost. This God will not let rivers drown his people, nor will fire burn them; God's people are precious beyond measure - no need for winnowing the wheat from the chaff.

Well, one of the great strengths of the Bible, this rich library of literature spanning centuries, with its multiple authors is the great variety of ways in which God is depicted, and, in the New Testament, the many faceted image of Jesus - of who he is and what he meant to his early followers and beyond that, what he might mean to us today and how we in our time, might be disciples.

So in our readings, we again have both love and judgment, and as I said back in Dec. judgment can be a form of love, a way of prompting change or transformation. In each of our lives there is indeed some chaff, parts of ourselves or parts of how we spend our time and resources that go to waste, that are not wheat, not good fruit. In The Message, a translation of the Bible in contemporary language, John's words about the coming of Jesus are rendered a bit differently. He says of Jesus that "he is going to clean house-make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned." This is a new twist on winnowing, and I think it helps us see that winnowing is not a bad metaphor for what we sometimes need to do, and now, at the start of a new year, might be a good time to start. What is it about Jesus that can help us with that? What about that first century man and the way he lived can guide us in how to live now?

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### DATE

Epiphany 1  
Sunday, Jan. 13, 2019

### PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

Isaiah 43:1-7  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Years ago, I came across a passage in a book by John Snow, then a professor of Pastoral Theology at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge. I was so struck by how Snow presents Jesus; he sticks to the Biblical narrative, but he shows us a Jesus for today. Here is the passage:

“When, at the baptism of Jesus, God spoke and said ‘This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased’ [it is as if God is saying to us] If you want to know who I am, if you want to know what reality is, if you want to understand what I have created and why, and why I have created you, look very closely at the piece of history this baptism begins. This is the most complete answer you are ever going to get to these questions.

‘Look closely at this Jewish peasant standing here. Keep your eyes on this man, listen to what he says, watch how he deals with the people around him and the creation within which he moves. See how he addresses the sick, the crippled, the blind and the deaf. See how he relates to outcasts and sinners. Listen to what he has to say to his enemies, to his persecutors, to the religious and secular authorities. See how he uses his time; what is important to him and unimportant to him...See how he loves and cares about children. Pay attention to how he treats women and how quickly they understand who he is.

‘Consider his attitudes towards the use of force and violence. Notice his courage when he is afraid. Notice that there are things that make him angry, and pay attention to what they are. Notice how at home he is in the world, how he acts as if he has a right to be here, how he enjoys being here...And pay attention to how he dies, how his fear of pain and death do not stop his expression of love and concern for his friends and family...How he meets death itself as a completion and perfection of his life, and not as bad luck or a dirty trick.

‘But above all, continue to pay attention when he dies. Watch as he is taken down from the cross and washed and wrapped in grave cloths by the women and put in the tomb, and notice a bit later that the tomb is empty. And notice how much this person, my beloved child, is like you.’

Notice how much this person, my beloved child, is like you. On this Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus’ baptism and renew our own baptismal vows, we are invited to look, listen, pay attention, consider and notice who Jesus is and how he lives. And in faith, we look to Jesus as God incarnate, God inhabiting our humanity, inviting us to live as part of God’s life in the world.

And that takes us to being winnowed, yes, as we needs must be from time to time, but also to being ourselves the winnowers, capable of seeing and separating wheat from chaff, in our own lives and in the wider world. Who in our democracy and how in our democracy, will we winnow out all that gets in the way of being the people and country we long to be? How will we help to make real the things that Jesus shows us about being human?

And how, especially, in this time of the partial shutdown of our government, might we most effectively reach out to the many who are impacted by this senseless exercise?

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What needs can we address, here in our community our neighborhood, our city? What can we at St. Columba's offer? How can we help those, who through no fault of their own are currently at risk, financially, professionally, emotionally?

After some thoughtful conversations among the staff this past week, Ledlie wrote a letter in the weekly eNews about some of the things that we can do. Prayer is foremost, and we will continue this in our Sunday prayers and every weekday in a simple Morning Prayer service at 8:30 in our chapel. But beyond our heartfelt prayers we will offer a Furlough Bible Study led by Amy and David on Wed. mornings, starting this week from 11-12, a time when folks can gather and reflect on how scripture might shed light on current concerns. And for those in a cash flow crisis, we can provide some financial help, aided by those who are able to contribute to this effort. We invite both those in need and those able to provide help to contact Ledlie and to be assured of confidentiality in so doing. Further, Susan Laing and others will be identifying resources for food or other necessities. For many this need for aid might be a first-time experience, and they may not have any idea of where to turn for help. And the Mothers Group will host a professionally led conversation on managing anxiety this Wed. as well - 10-11:30 am.

This is an uncertain, tough time, and I think we are to step up and step into Jesus' presence as the embodiment of God's love in this world. How can we be that - each of us, in tiny ways or in larger efforts?

It will take work and patience to be sure. But there are gifts of grace to help us - the gift of trust, the gift of hope - hard to conjure on our own, but abundantly offered by our God - listen again to the prophet Isaiah:

"Thus says the Lord...do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

These are promises to savor, ancient but true, promises that allow us to trust and to hope. With these promises, and with what Jesus shows us of how we might live, let us respond to God's love with faith and guts and the courage to live up to all that we are made to be, in this and every season. Amen.