

January 10, 2021

On this glorious feast day that concludes the Christmas Season, we join Jesus for his baptism in the Jordan, arriving just in time to witness The Father's blessing:

The Spirit, like a dove, descended upon him and a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."

This fundamental affirmation of love and relationship inaugurates Jesus' public ministry, and it will sustain him through the temptations in the desert, which follow immediately upon his baptism, and through his public ministry to his passion and death.

In St Luke's version of this story John the Baptist introduces Jesus to the crowd:

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (He will) clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Luke 3:16b-17

Jesus the Messiah baptizes everyone with a baptism of fire in the crucible of his incandescent love. This baptism separates the wheat from the chaff, the true from the false, the just from the unjust, the virtuous from the vicious.

Or, perhaps more accurately, this baptism enables those who desire it to be more true, more loving, more just and more virtuous, and to see with greater clarity and generosity that which is true and those who are just and virtuous.

Jesus set that crucible aflame at its most intense this past Wednesday when the Capitol Building was stormed. The flames of that blast engulfed us as it happened and continue to engulf us today. Not only that: we are also engulfed by a more virulent strain of the coronavirus and a deepening economic downturn for all but investors in the stock market.

What did you see on Wednesday? I saw those who had been grievously misled and enraged for months, if not years, and then wrongly provoked by the president that noontime to march on the Capitol.

Having arrived at the Capitol, which they called Our House, they failed to rise to the occasion that that building's venerability offered them. They could only mill around, pose and posture, shout, litter, and even steal.

Having come without a goal, they left without accomplishment. All that remained for them was their misdirected anger and resentment arising from their mistaken understanding of the Congress' electoral responsibilities on that day. Worse, having returned home, they and the author of their election discontent and his many enablers in the government and beyond remain as a toxic presence among us.

All this said, we must not turn these events into a story of Good Guys and Bad Guys: us on one side, all the miscreants on the other. A careful read of presidential transitions, the behavior of the liberal and conservative press, and the excesses of politicians and their followers on both sides make clear that all have sinned. Besides, the crucible doesn't play favorites nor offer free passes. The souls of all humanity need purification, and none of us is exempt.

If we - each of us - choose to participate in this purification, the divine love-fire of the crucible will burn away the dross of our shortcomings, our shortsightedness, our self-congratulation, our tendency to point fingers, our failure to love, to embrace, to comfort, and to offer justice.

If we - all of us - choose to participate, this fire will purify our partisan commitments so we can embrace the common good. It will call forth a life of moral vigor and virtuous action. It will prepare us for deeper commitment to the Lord and service to his people.

But we must choose the fire, choose now, and choose well at this unique moment of presidential transition. If we do not choose and choose well, we will remain in our misery, bereft of divine renewal.

In my Protestant youth I sang what we used to call a hymn with lyrics written in 1845 by James Russell Lowell, the American poet, and set to a majestic Welsh tune. Here are the first and last stanzas:

Once to ev'ry man and nation  
Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth and falsehood,  
For the good or evil side.  
Some great cause, some great decision  
Off'ring each the bloom or blight.  
And the choice goes by forever  
'Twixt that darkness and that light.

Tho' the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet the truth alone is strong.  
Tho' her portion be the scaffold,  
And upon the throne be wrong.  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow,  
Keeping watch above His own.

Now is our moment to decide – in this moment before the moment passes. We have watched as the cause of evil has prospered, with the wrong one on the throne. But we believe that Jesus, whose truth is strong, who was forced to stand on the scaffold, calls us to stand with him, and that our choice will sway the future toward the truth and light that God offers as he keeps watch over his own.

Our first reading confirms this claim:

I the Lord have called you for the victory of justice. I have grasped you by the hand...and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nation, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon those who live in darkness.

Isaiah 42:6-7

And our second reading adds that "the victory that conquers the world is our faith."  
I John 5

The baptismal fire of cleansing love prepares us to fight against the causes of evil, bring freedom to his people, and so enter into Jesus' victory.

Let's welcome the fire of Jesus' love that baptizes us. Rejoice in the crucible. Beg him to baptize us with his fire to make us

kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands...so that we can walk in the flame of (his) fire and among the brands (he) has kindled.

Isaiah 50:11