

The Three Baptisms

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Pentecost III, June 5, 2005

Acts 8:26-40 NIV

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

*He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before the shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.*

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Luke 12:47-56 NIV

“That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He said to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”

I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division (Luke 12:50-51 RSV).

In a few moments we’ll witness the baptism of a new member into the family of God. Water baptism is something most of us are somewhat familiar with. Even people with only a casual relationship to the church often want their children to be baptized. In France, for example, where today less than five percent of the population attend church, probably ninety percent have received Christian baptism. It’s just something people “do.” I remember how, when I was a young pastor in New Hampshire, one of the mothers in the town approached me about baptizing her young son. She said, “I thought it was time we had him done.” Obviously, I didn’t detect a great deal of Christian commitment in this request.

We're familiar with water baptism, I said, but it won't hurt to review what it means. When an adult makes the decision to follow Christ, baptism is sign of entering into a new life. Going "under the water" — whether by immersion or by sprinkling — is a symbol of participation in the death of Jesus, and then taking on the new life of his resurrection. The apostle Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore *with him* by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). The Ethiopian whom Philip baptized came to understand that Jesus is God's Servant who suffered in our behalf, and he wanted to be part of God's plan for our salvation. He wanted the new life the risen Christ brings. So he became the first Christian convert we know about to come from outside the Jewish community.

But what about a child who's too young to make a decision about following Christ? In that case, it's the parents who make the decision. They seek the best for their son or daughter, and they understand that life without Jesus, in a world such as ours, can be a formula for heartache and despair. So they promise to bring the child up in the faith. We know full well that when the child is older he or she will have to come to a decision about serving the Lord. But at least the parents can "stack the deck" in favor of choosing Christ, and that's what they promise to do in offering their child for the ordinance of baptism.

In both cases — baptism of children or adults — there's nothing "magical" about it. Baptism is a beautiful symbol of a commitment that's being made, but if the commitment isn't there, just "going through the motions" doesn't help. Baptism is the sign of coming into the family of God. For baptism to really "take" we have to *stay* in that family relationship, depending on God as our Father and loving his people as our brothers and sisters. The word *baptize* comes from a Greek Word that means "to dip," and it refers to the work of people who dye cloth in different colors. To be baptized means we take on the "color of Christ," so that we're recognizable as members of his family.

I've been speaking about *water baptism*, because it's not the only kind of baptism. The Bible mentions two other kinds, one of which is the *baptism with the Holy Spirit*. Beginning a few Sundays ago, we're in the Christian season known as Pentecost. Pentecost, the Bible tells us, was that time, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, when he sent his Holy Spirit upon his disciples, and for the very first time they began to proclaim that Jesus had risen from the dead and was the Lord, the Messiah his people had been expecting. The Bible says that Jesus' followers were *filled* with the Holy Spirit — with the power of the life of God — and began to speak with unknown tongues that the bystanders, from all over the Mediterranean world, understood as their own languages. This was what Jesus had promised his followers after the resurrection, when he told them, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

But this gift of the Holy Spirit wasn't a one-time gift. It's available to all followers of Jesus through all ages. In fact, the Bible urges us to receive this "baptism in the Holy Spirit," as it's often called. The Apostle Paul says, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Ephesians 5:18-20). The baptism in the Holy Spirit is something that, essentially, fulfills our baptism in water. As you know, in the Bible languages the word *spirit* is the same as the word for *breath* or *wind* — and breath is a symbol for *life*. The Holy Spirit is the life of Christ in us, and when that life is *released* we're able more fully to enter into that resurrection life that water baptism symbolizes.

How does it happen — this baptism or infilling of the Holy Spirit? How do we get *dipped* into the Spirit so that we take on the color of the life of God? Theologians have tried to answer that question in different ways. Some say it happens "automatically" whenever we commit our life to Christ, even if we don't see any outward sign of it. I don't think that's quite right, because what good is the baptism in the Holy Spirit if it doesn't make any difference in what people see in us, or what we see in ourselves? Other theologians relate it to speaking in other tongues, as happened to the disciples on the day of Pentecost, and a few other times in the Book of Acts. If you can speak or pray in an unknown language, then you've been filled with the Holy Spirit. That happened to me, and it was the beginning of my real growth in the Christian life. Like many other Christians, Shirley and I do pray in tongues now and then.

But I wouldn't want to make my experience a formula for everybody. I don't think there's a cookie-cutter approach to receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The infilling of the Spirit is the release of Jesus' resurrection power in our life that enables us to *witness* to him more effectively, sustain a *life style* consistent with biblical principles, and overflow with the *praises of God* and a joyful attitude, just like Paul said. All of this requires that you and I *let go of ourselves* and latch onto God as the "prime mover" of our life. However that release occurs for you, that's your baptism in the Holy Spirit.

But I said there are *three* baptisms in the Bible. And the third one is the one Jesus speaks about in our Gospel lesson for today. "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (Luke 12:49-51 RSV). That sounds kind of ominous, doesn't it? What in the world did Jesus mean by it?

To understand it better, we need to put Jesus' words into their historical context. Jesus uttered these words around what we know today as the year 27 or 28. At that time Roman forces occupied the Jewish homeland, and a nationalist movement was developing. (We see the same sort of thing in Iraq today, as militants create terror and havoc in their desire to throw off what they perceive to be foreign occupation.) But Jesus understood that this nationalist movement could only lead to destruction for his people and their holy city, Jerusalem. The desire to be politically free was a misplaced priority; what they really needed to do was to get back to their calling as a people chosen to bless all nations with the good news of God's rule. So Jesus preached the power of the kingdom of God, far more significant than the kingship of Caesar or of any revolutionary Jewish leader. In fact, Jesus came as the Son of God, the true King who could save his people from their appointment with destruction. Sadly, his message fell mostly on deaf ears. Those who accepted Jesus and put their faith in him were only a minority, destined to be persecuted by those who didn't understand what God was doing. Jesus knew that his way would lead him up the path of suffering, up the hill of Calvary to his death on the cross — and that only through his death and resurrection could victory come, as people began to understand who he really is, the long-awaited Messiah who would reveal God's truth and build God's people into a new family.

Jesus' adversaries didn't see what was coming if they continued in their rebellious ways. "You can predict the weather," he chided them, "but you can't read the 'signs of the times.'" Therefore, he saw that he would have to undergo this third baptism — a baptism marked by rejection and persecution and violence. He spoke of it in terms of a "baptism by fire." I call it the "baptism of suffering." Jesus was about to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah had written, centuries before, about the Servant of the Lord — the very words The Ethiopian official was reading when Philip met him on the road to Gaza:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? (Isaiah 53:6-8).

Jesus is our Savior, and God called him to this special task of suffering to atone for our sins and bring us back into the family of God. God called him into this "baptism of fire," the baptism of suffering. But is there a sense in which you and I, too, might have to undergo this third baptism? Today the Christian faith is under attack from many sides. Militant adherents of other religions seek to destroy the Christian witness in lands they control, such as Indonesia or Pakistan or Sudan. More Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than all previous centuries combined. I receive a newsletter from an evangelist that, every month, records new martyrdoms for the faith. Marxism did its best, in the former Soviet Union and its satellites, to stamp out Christian belief. Powerful forces in our culture — the media, the entertainment industry, the educational establishment, certain political groups — are working hard to negate biblical principles in public life and to marginalize and persecute Christians. The latest issue of a magazine I receive tells about a student at a major Pennsylvania university who was forcibly committed to a mental hospital after he tried to promote a Christian response to the campus performance of an anti-Christian play. Then, when he brought suit, the case was decided against him by a jury stacked with people biased against Christians.

You and I might never have to undergo this kind of “baptism by fire,” but we may have to face our own version of the “baptism of suffering.” In my earliest days as a Christian, I couldn’t help but notice that many committed Christians I knew had confronted some kind of serious problem in life, and it was through this trial that they turned to the Lord. In my own case, for example, it was the loss of a job and my teaching career, followed by a divorce, that opened me up to my need for Christ. For others it might have been a serious illness, loss of a child or other loved one, a battle with alcoholism, family violence or abuse. I suspect there are people here this morning who could testify to having passed through the “baptism of suffering” — and some are experiencing it as we speak.

For some of us, this third baptism has been the testing and proving of our faith, as we’ve found the Lord faithful despite our problems. On the strength of our water baptism and our baptism in the Holy Spirit, we’ve been able to face the agonies of this “baptism by fire” and grow stronger through them. For others of us, it was the “baptism by fire” that came first, revealing to us our need of a Savior and leading us to be baptized into Christ and to receive the filling of his Holy Spirit. As with the baptism in the Holy Spirit, there’s no “cookie-cutter” method. God deals with each of us in the way our needs require. Even dysfunctional and strained relationships, family arguments, problems with bosses or neighbors can lead us to the Lord, for as the Bible says in Psalm 76:10, even the “wrath of men” can result in the praise of God. Through whatever it takes, he reveals our need for him, and calls each of us into his loving, healing, comforting presence.

Do you hear Christ calling to you today, perhaps through your personal “baptism of suffering?” If so, the door is open for you to come into the family of God. If you know Jesus, come to his table this morning and join with your brothers and sisters in celebrating what Jesus has done to make us one with him, with our Father, and with one another. If you don’t yet really know Jesus, or if you aren’t sure, come anyway as his guest. It may well be that you’ll meet him here, as we share the bread and the cup, the symbols of his presence with us.

Sermon text ©2005 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable