

## **Sermon for January 10, 2021**

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A few years ago, our family took a trip to the Wisconsin Dells and stayed at the Kalahari hotel and waterpark. We spent many hours at the outdoor waterpark area where there were a wide variety of pools, waterslides and water activities. I tend towards rides like the Lazy River. For those of you unfamiliar with that attraction, it is simply a circular path of water with a slow current. You lay on a tube and float...in a circle...slowly...in bathtub temperature water. Love it.

My son however does not share my love of slow, relaxing attractions and due to my love for my son I found myself in line for the “Smoke that Thunders” family tube ride. While the Lazy River is ground level, “The Smoke that Thunders” begins at the top of what feels like a 10 story stair climb. From atop of the launching platform one can see over the top of the hotel, across the highway and I’m pretty sure into a neighboring state. As you stand on this platform freezing, you are surrounded by warning signs... do not ride this ride if you have back or neck issues, heart conditions, high blood pressure...all clarifying that the park holds no responsibility for your impending death. When it comes to your turn, lifeguards hold a large tube as each family member climbs in and positions themselves in opposite corners. They then instruct you too keep all hands and feet inside the tube and to hold on for dear life to the small handles on either side of this inflatable floatee. With that they give you a push into the propulsion streams that launch you onto the ride.

Immediately you plummet straight down, although you can’t really tell because of the water pummeling your face and the sudden darkness of the tube the fast current is carrying you through. You emerge into the light only long enough to realize you are sliding up the side of a very high angled wall. At the top you have only the briefest second to catch a glimpse of the cement world below, before you start spinning around the entrance of a funnel through which you then drop through the center of, starting you on another rushing downward trajectory. After jostling down the last slope you then hit the landing base of the ride with enough force that you are launched out of your tube, into the depths of the pool water, limbs flailing, disorientedly trying to discern if you are swimming towards the surface or the base of the pool. Out of breath, spitting chlorinated water, you surface to see the amused face of the lifeguard and your son beaming... “Let’s do that again”.

Today we hear story of Jesus’ baptism and join in giving thanksgiving for our own baptisms. As I reflected on this text and our baptismal lives, amidst the turmoil of this week, I am struck by the idea that we have too often viewed baptism as a day on the Lazy River instead of a life call to the “Smoke that Thunders”.

In today’s Gospel text we read Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. “And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” We envision this beautiful cinematic event – sun beams shining down on glistening

water, a graceful white dove on silent wing, a soothing voice speaking words of love. But I think we need to take a deeper look and recraft our image.

We need to put the text into the context of the larger story. John has appeared in the wilderness. These Jordan waters are not a glistening stream in the center of town, they are wilderness waters. And John is there with an urgent message to repent, yelling into the void that people are to turn, to be ready for a completely new way of life. And while John has attracted the attention of the crowds he is also at the heart of controversy, being opposed by many who do not want to hear. Only 3 verses later, John is arrested... he will be beheaded for his role in this scene. John stresses that he is not worthy to even tie Jesus' sandals much less baptize him and so you must believe he enters those wilderness waters with trembling hands. He is not on the Lazy River, he is standing at the top of that platform, looking over the countryside, seeing the warning signs, his impending death and the propulsion streams he is about to be thrust into.

As John and Jesus stand in these wilderness waters, we read the heavens are torn open. Torn open! This is not simply the clouds parting and the rays of sunshine breaking through. The heavens are torn open! The only other time this verb is used in our scripture text is when the temple curtain is torn in two at the crucifixion...the temple curtain that represented the separation between God and God's people. This verb...torn open...heaven and earth merge... God breaks loose in the world.

The text continues, the Spirit descends LIKE a dove on him. The text does not say descended as a dove, only like a dove. And the original translation does not read the "Spirit descended on him" but rather the Spirit descended INTO him. He is filled with the Spirit. In a text study I took part in this week, Professor Caroline Lewis, went as far as to say Jesus was "possessed", taken over by the Holy Spirit. She points out that one of the first things Jesus' does in his ministry following his baptism, following his being filled/possessed with the Holy Spirit, is to cure a man possessed by an evil spirit; the text reading "a new teaching with authority, he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him"; the power of the Holy Spirit at work within.

Then a voice from heaven says "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.". This voice we often hear as melodic song, is the voice that spoke and creation came into being. This is the voice spoken of in our Psalm today. "The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice, the voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees; makes Lebanon skip. It "Bursts forth in lightning flashes and shakes the wilderness. The voice makes oak trees writhe and strips the forests bare, all cry "Glory"! This voice is powerful. It creates and re-creates. It makes creation tremble!

And this voice, as the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends into Jesus, says "You are my Son, the Beloved". And the next sentence of scripture reads, "and the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness" for forty days where he would be tempted by Satan, amidst wild beasts. This voice, these words "you are my Son, the beloved" and the inpouring of

the Spirit, prepare him for the wilderness, the temptation, the evil, the struggle, the ministry of God to follow. THIS is Jesus' baptism! And this is the baptism Jesus invites us into.

We have prettified our own baptisms. We dress our children in white gowns, surround them with family members, splash their heads with clean water from the artistically carved baptism font, in the middle of stained glass and congregational worship. And this is important; it is beautiful. It is a passing on of faith from generation to generation; it is a celebration of a member of the family of God. BUT our image of baptism cannot be limited to this. Baptism is a radical act of God. Through water and word, God tears apart the heavens to come to us. The Holy Spirit, descends into us. We hear the words "You are my children, my beloved!" And in our baptisms we are prepared to be launched into the wilderness, the temptation, the evil, the struggle, the ministry of God to follow. This is not the Lazy River, this is the "Smoke that Thunders". Hang on for dear life! And remember your impending death...for even that is taken care of in God's baptismal promises! This is baptism!

In our service of Confirmation, also known as the service of Affirmation of Baptism, we ask "Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism?" and here is what we say living into the covenant of Baptism means: "to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lords' supper, to **proclaim the good news** of God in Christ **through word and deed, to serve all people**, following the example of Jesus, and **to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.**" We ask God to help and guide us. We pray "Stir up in us your gift of the Holy Spirit".

We are baptismal people. We hear the voice in the wilderness calling us to repent, to turn, to open ourselves to a new life. We stand in the wilderness waters, despite the conflicts that rage around us, despite our impending death, and the Holy Spirit descends into us. The powerful voice of God speaks, creating and re-creating, we tremble as God's beloved, and filled with the Holy Spirit we are sent, driven into the wilderness to the work of God. Do we want to be possessed by the Holy Spirit? "Stir up in us the Holy Spirit" is a daring prayer.

The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, right where he needed to be to prepare for and do the work of God.

We have left the font. We are in the wilderness. Let us trust and live into our baptisms. Maybe the wilderness is right where we need to be for the work of God. Dare to pray "Stir up in us the Holy Spirit". It will not be lazy. There may not be relaxing waters upon which to float. More likely there will be Thunder, with water in your face, and flailing limbs and disorientation. But you have received the Spirit and the powerful voice of God speaks. Hang on for **the promise is Christ holds you** in these baptismal waters and will hold you even into death.