

Psalm 29:10-11: The LORD sits enthroned above the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as King for evermore. The LORD shall give strength to his people; the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.

Introduction

The chorus of a Vineyard hymn, “Refiner’s Fire,” goes like this:

Refiner's fire/My heart's one desire
Is to be holy/Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy/Set apart for You,
Ready to do Your will

I remember singing songs like this. I remember wanting “holiness” to be my *one* desire. I was so moved by this desire, I dedicated myself not only to the holiness of right thought but also to right action. This is the way active holiness was explained to me: not having anything to do with vile “secular” culture that is the playground of Satan and his demons waiting for unsuspecting Christians to wonder in and partake of his pleasing fruit and fall from grace through his seduction to damnation. I had to avoid anything deemed morally “bad”. This is what it meant to be set apart for Christ and holy: to keep myself clean from the stain sin (of “not Christian”). So, following recommendation, I tossed “secular” CDs, avoided “secular” movies, made sure my books were either the Bible or “Christian”, and ditched friends who weren’t Christian. I’d keep my mind on heavenly things and make sure my deeds aligned with them. I would go to Church every Sunday, memorize scripture, submit to men, and attend every bible study. This is how I was holy, and this was God’s will.

Sadly, that definition of holiness ran me into the ground. I had to spend my time focused on myself, on my image, on my presentation of myself so I could appear right with God. That definition of holiness was killing me, making me judgmental, condescending, angry, and starved for personal substance and presence and action. I didn’t reckon with myself, I just tucked everything I didn’t like in a box and shoved it somewhere else. It turned me so far inward that I couldn’t follow Jesus and I couldn’t see my neighbor and her needs. I was inside out, self-consumed, dysfunctional, and dead. This was holiness? This was being set apart?

Refiner's fire/My heart's one desire
Is to be holy/Set apart for You, Lord

Acts 19:1-7

...[Paul] said to them, “did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” But they [said] to him, “But we heard nothing if there is a Holy Spirit.” And [Paul] said, “Into what then/therefore were you baptized?” (Acts 19:2-3a; *translation mine*).

The way the introductory Greek reads suggests Paul has *intent* to go to Ephesus to find those who believe in Jesus to ask some interesting questions.¹ When he finds them, Paul asks if they've received the Holy Spirit. This is Paul's current crucial mission.² Paul wants to know: *has God taken up residence with you and in you?* The disciples reply they've not heard there is a Holy Spirit. Paul's response? Another question: *into what therefore were you baptized?* While the question is simple the impact is profound. The disciples explain they were baptized by John. *Well...okay...Paul says...but...:* there is John and then there is Jesus; there is the verbal assent of repentance and then there is the bodily assent of practice; there is cleansing the outer person with water and then there is the refining fire of God's cleansing the inner person; there is water and then there is Spirit.³

For Paul, John's baptism with water is for the confession of sin and repentance. But it's not enough. There's more. There's a trajectory involved in baptism that necessitates the presence of God *in* the life of the believer; it's this presence, this Spirit, that unites us to God through faith in Christ. This trajectory is started by John, according to Paul, and it is finished by Christ.⁴ John is the herald and Jesus the message. Not only their bodies must be baptized, washed, and dedicated to God but also their work, their discipleship must be baptized in Christ. It's through repentance we die and are submerged in water; it is through this death we find life in the baptism of Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁵

"I have baptized you with water," says John the Baptist. "[B]ut he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," (Mk 1:8).

The one who is baptized last in the Jordan by John is now the first of New Creation, of the new order, of the new age, of the "new day."⁶ In being last in the waters of the Jordan and receiving

¹ Εγενετο δε εν τω τον Απολλω εινα εν Κορινθω Παυλον διελθοντα τα ανωτερα μερη [κατ]ελθειν εις Εφεσον και ευρειν τινες μαθητας... (Acts 19:1). I'm taking the aorist active infinitive ευρειν to have intentional direction of action thus as apposition in relation to the aorist active infinitive of [κατ]ελθειν which completes the thought of the aorist active participle διελθοντα: Paul passed through the higher part and came down into Ephesus. Why? Well, namely, to find some disciples. In other words and looking at the questions that follow in the dialogue between Paul and the disciples, he is intentionally looking for disciples to make sure they've received the Spirit.

² Willie James Jennings *Acts Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* Louisville, KY: WJK, 2017. 184, "These were not people who needed convincing. Their commitments to a new way were clear. Yet the questions are crucial."

³ Jennings *Acts* 184, "John was preparation. The way of repentance he declared in Israel was the stage for the one who lived that life of repentance for his people. John was a person, but Jesus was a person and a place of living. John was an event that flashed across the landscape of Israel. Jesus was the bringer of a new time that extends to all space."

⁴ Jennings *Acts* 184, "These questions expose not simply gaps in their discipleship but lack of clarity of its telos, its end, goal, and fulfillment. Clearly John the Baptist presented a renewal movement in Israel, a calling home, a clarifying work establishing the divine claim on a beloved people with a purpose. That purpose was to trumpet a new day in Israel. Paul is of that new day, and soon these disciples of John will also be of that new day."

⁵ Jennings *Acts* 184, "The saving work of God is always new, always starting up and again with faith...Paul invites these disciples to *baptize their discipleship in Jesus*, and thereby join their lives to his in such a way that they will lose their life in the waters only to find it again in the resurrected One."

⁶ Jennings *Acts* 184, "Baptism in Jesus' name signifies bodies that become the new day."

the baptism of repentance with water by John, Jesus is the one who stands among the people and in solidarity with God. As the first of the new divine action in the world, Jesus of Nazareth the Christ, Emmanuel, the promised divine child of Mary, is God incarnate in solidarity with humanity in those same waters of death and new life. Jesus is in solidarity with God in God's mission to seek and save the lost⁷ and with humanity in its plight.⁸ This is the one who will leave the Jordan and begin his ministry in the world focused on bringing in and including those who are shut out and excluded, mending the wounded, soothing the brokenhearted, and calling by name those whose names are forgotten.

In the event of baptism, Jesus's history becomes our history⁹--we, with our histories (past, present, and future), are grafted into the history of Christ (past, present, and future). It's in this event where our activity in water baptism is paradoxically identical with the activity of God in the baptism of the spirit.¹⁰ It's here we're made holy, receive holy gifts, and do holy things because of the presence of God. (Where Christ is proclaimed there Christ is and holy activity is worked out in and through us.) We're baptized by water and Spirit into Jesus's mission and ministry. One by one, each of us is encountered in the waters of the Jordan, in repentance; one by one, each of us is encountered by God in the event of faith. Thus, in this baptism, one by one, each of us must reckon with ourselves and ask: *will I follow Jesus out of the Jordan?*

⁷ Joel B. Green "The Gospel of Luke" *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.187, "Working in concert with the endowment of the Holy Spirit, this divine affirmation presents in its most acute form Jesus' role as God's agent of redemption....His mission and status are spelled out in relation to God and with reference to his purpose mission of redemption and establishes peace with justice in ways that flow determined by obedience to God's purpose that the devil will test in 4:1-13."

⁸ Green 186, "Now however Jesus' identity in relation to God and God's redemptive project is proclaimed by God himself. Heaven itself has opened providing us with direct insight into God's own view of things. That the voice of God agrees with those earlier voices (i.e., of Gabriel, Elizabeth, and the possible responses to Jesus. One can join Elizabeth, the angels, the narrator, and others who affirm Jesus' exalted status and/or identity as God's Son, or one can reject this evaluation and so pit oneself over against God."

⁹ Cf W. Travis McMaken *The Sign of the Gospel* "Barth's discussion of Spirit baptism comprises a dialectical movement between two poles. One pole is God's objective work of reconciliation in Christ and the other is the faithful and obedient human response to that work. Spirit baptism is where these two poles meet in a dynamic event of effectual call and free response. Barth's discussion of this event draws upon and brings together many important strands in his theology, for here culminates the movement of the electing God's divine grace as it reaches particular women and men among as elected in Jesus Christ. In this discussion, Barth walks the fine line between Christomonist and anthropomonist positions, neither creating the history of Jesus Christ as that which swallows the histories of human individuals, nor relegating Christ's history to merely symbolic significance. Barth also does not denigrate the work of the Spirit or separate it from that of Christ. All of these things comprise a differentiated and ordered unity in Barth's thought, aimed at grounding faithful human obedience on God's grace in Jesus Christ." 174

¹⁰ McMaken *Sign* 174. "Spirit baptism comprises the awakening of faith that actualizes in one's own life the active participation in Christ to which every individual is elected. This awakening demands and necessarily includes faithful and obedient human response. In the first instance, this response is faith itself. However, Barth argues that there is a paradigmatic way in which water baptism comprises this response. Water baptism constitutes the foundation of the Christian life precisely as such a paradigmatic response."

Conclusion

To follow Jesus means to love others and to love God, to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and to stand in solidarity with God. To follow Jesus in this moment means to come against empire (the deeper theme of Acts 19),¹¹ like Paul did, like the disciples eventually did, and just like Jesus did in his divine ministry and mission in the world. When Jesus leaves the Jordan the kingdoms of humanity come under judgment and are exposed for what they are: realms of death and darkness.

This week we witnessed a coup. A coup to uphold and maintain systems, ideologies, authorities, and persons in opposition to life. White supremacy and its dominant culture of whiteness reared its head and stormed the state house and demanded democracy be silenced so the empire of *man* can remain standing. It wasn't solely about supporting Trump but ultimately what Trump represents: the old age of the evil empire of death and destruction. The message sent to black indigenous people of color, to the lgbtqia+ community, to our Jewish brothers and sisters, and to womankind was loud and clear: power and privilege and me and mine is worth destroying your life, liberty, and democracy. This is what narcissistic power does when it's challenged; this is the fit privilege throws when threatened. I thought 2020 exposed just how bad things are; I stood corrected on Wednesday. We are in the process of being exposed. We have racial capitalism¹² deep in our bones and it's dragging us, each of us, into darkness and death unto death. Be sure: this is not a "them over there" problem; it's a problem for *us*. We are held captive and are complicit here. I am held captive and am complicit here.

Willie James Jennings writes,

Both the water and the touch become the stage on which the spirit will fall on our bodies, covering us with creating and creative power and joining us to the life of the Son. Through the Spirit, the word comes to skin, and becomes skin, our skin in concert with the Spirit.¹³

The word comes to skin, becomes skin, our skin in concert with the Spirit... This means that we, in our baptism with water and the presence of the Spirit and word come to skin, are intimately

¹¹ Barbara Rossing "Turning the Empire (οικουμένη) Upside Down: A Response" *Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics* eds. Eric D. Barreto, Matthew L. Skinner, and Steve Walton. Ny NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017) p. 154 "In the οικουμένη all are Romans': this fact—mourned by Agrippa but celebrated by Aelius Aristides—describes the first-century context both geographically and politically. It is the context we have to assume also for Acts. So, I would argue οικουμένη in Acts means 'empire'. And this proves important for the reading of Acts 17 (both the account of the incident at Thessalonica as well the Areopagus speech) and acts 19 along with the trial scene we find there. What Paul is turning upside down is not the 'world' in the cosmic sense but rather the 'empire' or imperial world."

¹² David Justice defines this term in his paper "Negating Capitalism: The Beloved Community as Negative Political Theology and Positive Social Imaginary" presented at AAR/SBL 2020 Annual Conference Virtual/Online forum *Black Theology and Martin Luther King, Jr.* 12/2020. Justice writes, "Racial capitalism, wherein racism and capitalism are mixed such that race is exploited to gain capital from racial identity..." p.1.

¹³ Jennings Acts 185

connected to the rest of humanity—in all shades of melanin. Thus, in no way can we support governments, people, actions, ideologies, institutions and systems designed to hinder and threaten lives. As sons and daughters of life and light, we are exhorted to live in ways to make this world free and safe for our black and brown brothers and sisters in light and life.

Womanist¹⁴ theologian Kelly Brown Douglas writes,

It is time for us to be embodied realities of the black prophetic tradition and with moral memory, moral identity, moral participation, and moral imagination begin to create the world we 'crave for our daughters and sons'...Now is the time. It is the time to live into God's time and to create that new heaven and new earth where the time of stand your ground culture is no more.¹⁵

For those of us encountered by God in the event of faith, we must harken back to our baptism of water and the refining fire of the Spirit. We must begin with ourselves. Without this deep and painful self-reflection and self-work, there can be no substantial change. We must ask those very hard questions: *how do I participate in these death dealing systems? How have I squandered divine holiness for human power and privilege? Where does anti-black racism live in my body, my mind, my heart?* Following Jesus out of the Jordan demands we step into the light and be exposed, and we repent of our guilt. It means we begin again washed clean through the water of repentance *and* resurrected into the new life of the Holy Spirit in the name of Christ in union with God and God's mission in the world on behalf of the beloved for this is holiness and for this we are set apart.

¹⁴ *Womanism* is a social theory based on the history and everyday experiences of women of color, especially black women. It seeks, according to womanist scholar Layli Maparyan (Phillips), to "restore the balance between people and the environment/nature and reconcil[e] human life with the spiritual dimension" (from Wikipedia)

¹⁵ Kelly Brown Douglas *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. New York NY: Orbis, 2015. 227. Lorde quoted.