

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What a wonderful day!

Here we are,

gathered together on the first Sunday of a new year  
on one of the great festival days of the church year—  
the Baptism of Our Lord—

and we mark the day

with not one but *two* baptisms

and the reception of new members into our congregation.

It is indeed an exciting and invigorating time to be the church!

The prophet Isaiah proclaims God's Word,  
saying "When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you; and through the rivers,  
they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you."<sup>1</sup>

Luke reports in the Acts of the Apostles,  
"Now when the apostles at Jerusalem  
heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God,  
they sent Peter and John to them....  
Then Peter and John laid their hands on them,  
and they received the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup>

And again,  
Luke records the words of John the Baptist,  
"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.  
His winnowing fork is in his hand,  
to clear his threshing floor

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 43:2 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Acts 8:14,  
17 (NRSV)

and to gather the wheat into his granary;  
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”<sup>3</sup>

This morning,  
we will be receiving two new sisters in Christ  
by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.  
Brooke and Danika will join us  
and all of the church militant  
in our common work for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
They,  
like all members of the Body of Christ,  
will be baptized with water and the Holy Spirit,  
cleansing them of all their sins  
and killing the Old Eve in them  
so that they might be reborn  
as children of God and coheirs with Christ.  
For a brief time, perhaps,  
they will be the newest of God’s Chosen People.  
But the good news is that they will be God’s children,  
and having been sealed with the cross of Christ,  
they will be marked as His forever.  
They represent the hope and promise for the future—  
not just the secular future  
into which they will live and grow,  
but the sacred future,  
that promised time when Christ will come again  
in power and majesty and glory  
to judge the living and the dead.  
Just as Brooke and Danika receive God’s eternal gift of life everlasting,  
so too are we reminded of the same assurances made to us five,  
twenty-five, fifty,  
or even eighty or more years ago.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:16b-17 (NRSV)

For Jesus,  
the baptism by John was unnecessary, of course,  
because Jesus was without sin,  
and therefore had no need for a baptism of repentance.  
Instead,  
the baptism of Jesus marks the start of his public ministry,  
and also his acceptance of his human nature  
in addition to the divine.  
After he was baptized,  
God appears in the form of the voice from above,  
and the Holy Spirit came to Jesus in the form of the dove—  
the very symbol this congregation  
long ago selected as it's representation  
of the abiding presence of the Holy Trinity in our midst.

This is important,  
dear friends.  
Only in Luke do we hear of a bodily representation of the Holy Spirit.  
Here,  
Luke goes out of his way  
to make it clear that God's presence  
in the form of the Holy Spirit is here to stay.  
The presence of the Holy Spirit is important to Luke,  
and he wants his readers and hearers  
to understand why it is important.

The work of Jesus would not continue  
if it were necessary for Jesus to do all the “heavy lifting” himself.  
Because it was necessary for Jesus to live,  
die, rise from the dead,  
*and* ascend into heaven,  
it would be impossible for Jesus  
to remain on earth to do the work he had begun.  
Therefore,  
there had to be a mechanism

to place the powers which Jesus held—  
or at least *some* of the powers and abilities of Jesus—  
into the work of others who would remain,  
live their lives,  
and pass on the faith to those generations to come  
until that time when God the Father  
would send Christ back into the world  
to rule through the eschaton.

Therefore,  
my sisters and brothers,  
we are filled with the Holy Spirit when we are baptized,  
and at other times in our lives—  
ordinations, for example,  
or during prayer—  
we ask God to fill us or another person  
with the power of the Holy Spirit—  
a “second helping,” if you will,  
of the Spirit which fills us in our baptism.

Just as the Spirit is described as a dove,  
it is also described as descending like flames of fire.  
Isaiah reminds us not to fear that fire,  
because God will protect us,  
seeing that we go on unharmed by the licks of flames upon us,  
just as we might be drowned in the waters of baptism,  
but are saved and restored as new creatures of God’s creation.

And again,  
as we heard several weeks ago,  
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ comes with a baptism of water,  
fire, and the Holy Spirit,  
and wields the pitchfork,  
clearing the floor of the chaff  
and letting it be consumed in a roaring fire,

while the wheat remains,  
to be collected together  
and put to the good uses of nourishing others—  
as in the form of bread and other foods—  
or for growing new crops—  
as seeds planted and tended to in the fields and harvested again,  
increasing the yield each time.

Dear friends,  
today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord,  
and it is right and salutary  
that we join in the work of the “wheat” which has gone before us,  
planting in these new sisters the flame of the holy Spirit,  
and welcoming others into the ministry  
we share in proclaiming Christ as our Savior  
through prayer and the laying on of hands.  
Our baptism is just the initiatory rite of the Christian assembly.  
Having been initiated and welcomed into the family of God,  
we are then called upon  
to take our place in the footsteps of the apostles,  
the Early Church Fathers,  
the Reformers,  
and all who have walked before us in faith.  
Filled with the Holy Spirit,  
we are called by God as His own,  
gathered together in the community of saints,  
taught that which is important to building up the faithful,  
and then sent into the world to make disciples of others—  
to welcome them into the household of God,  
baptizing those who have not been baptized,  
praying for all who have and have not.

Today,  
in the shadows of the Nativity of our Lord,  
when Christ was made known

to the Chosen People through the shepherds,  
and the Epiphany of our Lord,  
when Christ was made known  
to the Gentiles through the wise men from the East,  
we continue our work,  
commanded of us by Christ Jesus  
at his ascension into heaven,  
to make disciples of all nations  
and baptize in the name of the Father  
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.