

January 10, 2010 - Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple [PDF] (Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)

Clearly we may not have been having our best editorial day in the office this week going over the bulletin. There might be a few little funny things here and there, but you also might be tempted to think that perhaps there was some oversight in singing an advent hymn -- "Hey, oh, by the way, did you know it's after Advent?" No, no, we actually intended to sing an advent theme. And yes, once again, we are hearing from that John the Baptist. I mean, we only heard from him at least two, maybe more, times in December and yes, John the Baptist makes one more appearance here in the first Sunday after Epiphany, here on the feast day of the baptism of Jesus. My, how fast Jesus has grown.

But the real story, the real headliner, if you will, of the day may have gotten by you a little quickly. It was in those very few verses that we read this morning from the Acts of the Apostles. So in case you missed it, there's something happening in Samaria and it's big and it's shocking and it's great and it's terrifying. Let me read these to you again. "When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as of yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." This is big news. What possible metaphor could come to mind? I don't know. Picture every Cameron Crazy removing the Duke Blue and showering themselves with the other blue. It's inconceivable.

Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus gives his disciples the great commission, "Go, make disciples of all the nations." Later the Holy Spirit comes upon the twelve apostles in the upper room after the ascension and we have Pentecost. Peter and John become the leaders of this new religious movement, a movement within Judaism that is viewed as dangerous. Peter and John begin to dominate Jerusalem and threaten the religious authorities of the Jewish temple. The signs and wonders Peter and John perform become powerful recruitment enticement. Lots of Jews from all over the Diaspora are being baptized, learning to live in the spirit of this new community that follows the risen one, Jesus. Why, they sell all their goods and put everything they have in common.

Now, while all this excitement is going on in Jerusalem, within Orthodox Judaism this upstart newly ordained deacon -- someone named Phillip, someone off the bench -- decides to travel out to Samaria, to a town, a region, to an ethnic group that is despised by the Jews of Jerusalem. And in fact, they in Samaria despise those people in Jerusalem right back. You'll remember those other stories in the New Testament. References to the Samaritan. Jesus scandalized his friends when he speaks to a Samaritan woman. It's a doubly inappropriate encounter because of gender and ethnicity. Jesus uses the story of the Good Samaritan to tell us how the protection and the defense of the dignity of another human being is a commandment that trumps any pre-existing condition of animosity. Despite the history, despite the physical dangers at stake, Phillip goes to Samaria. And lo and behold, they accept him. More importantly, the Samaritans accept the Gospel. The good news that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and a light to all nations and all people.

When Peter and John hear this news of all these wholesale baptisms happening all over Samaria, they take their own long walk to Samaria. They understand that these new disciples who now want to play for a different team have undergone a vast conversion, but they need some conditioning. Some strength training. Though their conversion has begun, the apostles come to confirm the good works begun in them. The apostles come to lay their hands upon them and strengthen them by the power of the Holy Spirit. If you take a close look in Luke and in his second volume, Acts, you will see that baptism by water is one thing, but baptism of the Holy Spirit with fire is another. Sometimes that might be simultaneous, but sometimes it's separate. In fact, John the Baptist points it out at the baptism of Jesus. Watch out. Watch out. It is one thing to be cleansed from our sins. To be given a chance at a new start. It is another thing to be set on fire by the Holy Spirit and to be so transformed as not to just get a second chance, but a whole new life.

Samaria, what we see happening is not just the turning around of individual souls, but the creation of whole new communities empowered by the Holy Spirit, the church. The Holy Spirit drives us. The members of this new community. The Holy Spirit drives us as it drove Phillip into a relentless pursuit of reconciliation. The mission of the church is reconciliation with God and with one another. It's hard and it's dangerous and it's wonderful.

Phillip's mission to Samaria brings together long, estranged Semitic people who trace their ancestry back to the same patriarchs, but can't see in each other's face someone worth dignifying. The work of reconciliation means pulling down walls and building up understanding. It happens in workplaces and in our homes. It happens when we cross all the cultural divides. When we bring a priest here from the Sudan, when we send a deacon here to Belize. It happens when we stop and ask what are we doing when we're set on fire by the Holy Spirit. What are we doing? Why don't we ask the harder questions like why not spend more money on schools, secondary schools for girls in Sub-Saharan Africa? Why not spend more money on microloans to family farmers in Central America, and then put an end to building up and stockpiling weapons of mass destruction? Taking and spreading the word of God costs a lot in our lives, but that's what we're called to do by name by baptism by the Holy Spirit with fire. It turns our worlds upside down. It sends us out into dangerous territories, deep waters, even consuming fires.

Last week I had one of my typical NPR stuck-in-the-driveway moments. I had reached home. It was cold. Remember last week? Like today, cold. And yet I'm sitting in the car. I did turn off the engine -- environmentalist. But I stayed in my cold car because I had to hear the end of this captivating story. "All Things Considered" was reporting the death of a 92-year old Japanese man. They were recounting the events of this remarkable man's life. On the morning of Tuesday, August 6th, 1945, 29-year old Tsutomu Yamaguchi stepped off a street car in Hiroshima. He was a young engineer in Hiroshima on a business trip. As he stepped down from the tram, he looked up and saw a B-29 Bomber fly over. A moment later there was a flash over the center of the city a couple of miles away. Yamaguchi felt himself lifted up and seemingly suspended in the air. He lost consciousness. When he came to, he surveyed the destruction around him and began to realize that something extraordinary and horrific had happened. Once he realized he could still walk, he hobbled to a nearby bomb shelter where others had taken refuge. They were the ones to tell him that he had been burned over most of the left side of his

body. The next day, despite the severity of his wounds, Yamaguchi made his way through unrecognizable carnage. He noticed the silence. He noticed the walking ghosts of children. And amazingly, he found and boarded a train bound for his hometown, bound for Nagasaki. Two days later -- perhaps typical of the work ethic of his culture -- Yamaguchi, bandages and all, went to work. His co-workers would not believe his descriptions of what had happened three days before. And as they argued, there was another flash and another shock wave. And everything around the office space of Yamaguchi on either side in his Mitsubishi plant was destroyed. He had survived the second dropping of an atomic bomb.

They had an interview with Yamaguchi before he died and a reporter asked why in the later years, the decades of his life after decades and decades of radiation sickness not just for him and his wife and his children -- his children who had died before because of extreme exposure to radiation -- the reporter asked Yamaguchi why he had become such a man of peace and a man of hope and a man of reconciliation. Yamaguchi replied, "I believe in love. I believe in human beings. The reason I hate the atomic bomb is because of what it does to the dignity of human beings." This is what he said. "When you forget the dignity of individual human beings, that is when you are heading towards the destruction of the earth. When you forget the dignity of individual human beings, that is when you are heading towards the destruction of the earth." That dignity of human beings thing, does that ring a bell?

Yamaguchi was not a Christian. He was an observant Buddhist. He was not baptized by water in the name of Jesus, the way that we understand baptism. But he was certainly baptized by fire. The fire did not destroy him in body or in spirit. Ironically, the suffering he endured refined him. In a sense it remade him. It burned away the unimportant, the trivial and left him converted to seeking and protecting the dignity of all human beings. I think he was baptized by fire and something holy.

You remember the words of your baptismal covenant? You remember the vows that you've made for yourself and on behalf of others? That vow that in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit we will strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being? Why did God choose to become flesh? God took on human flesh so that we could not forget the dignity of the human body, the human soul, the human spirit. Why did God give us the sacrament of the incarnation? So that we might see in every human being the deity of God.

My friends, there is so much good life that surrounds us and that is ahead of us. Good and abundant life. But there are no doubt some fiery ordeals ahead also. Some dangerous and deep waters. What did the prophet say? What did God say through the words of the prophet? "Fear not. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. When you pass through the waters" -- not if -- "I will be with you. When you go through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk with fire, the flame will not consume you." When, not if. "Do not fear, I am with you always."

When we receive the power of the Holy Spirit, not only are we reconciled with God, but we're brought together and reconciled with one another and that means what happens to one of us happens to all of us. Maybe we won't experience the same degree of pain and loss and frustration in our various fiery ordeals, but the promise is the same because God is with us always and at all times. And by the power of the Holy Spirit in baptism, we are all with one another.

We have work to do. We have celebrations to create, sorrows to share, good news to proclaim. We have divisions to end, relationships to repair and communities of peace and justice to build, all by the power and the fire of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray.

*Almighty and most merciful God, grant that by the indwelling of your Holy Spirit we may be enlightened and strengthened for your service to do the work you have given us to do. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.*