

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Jan 12, 2025 right after the fires in LA. It is based on Isaiah 43 and Luke 3:15-22.

In our lessons for today we have a who lot of water language, fire language, voice of God language, and Holy Spirit language. And the fire language gives me pause as I think about what is happening in California and the wildfires. Our prayers are with them.

In our first lesson from Isaiah 43, the Lord God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah a word of hope and restoration to people who are in exile in Babylon. It speaks to people who have been displaced from their homes and their families against their own will. They long to return to home. It promises God's presence with them in uncertain times. It recalls images of the Exodus story when God parted the Red Sea and the people passed through the waters. And then there is language of fire. "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

The fire language takes on a whole new meaning for me in light of the wildfires in LA. Houses and people are being consumed by the fire. I can't read this text literally about fire not consuming you, because fire is consuming people, pets, and property. Fire can bring destruction, loss, and grief. But we also know in nature, fire can cleansing and a catalyst for new life on the earth's floor. For me, fire in this text is a metaphor for the times in life when we are up against it. Being thrown into the fire can also mean we are heading into the unknown.

The fire language also reminds me of the story of Shadrach, Meshac, and Abednego in the book of Daniel 3. I remember I was in the hospital as a chaplain at Gundersen Lutheran in La Crosse during my training as a pastor. I visited a person in the waiting room who was distraught, and whose spouse was in emergency surgery. She was fearful she was going to lose him. She said to me, "Now I know what it feels like to be thrown into a fired turned up 7 times hotter than normal." It took me a bit, but she is referring to scripture. She was talking about the Shadrach, Meshac, and Abednego story, when they were thrown into the firey furnace turned up 7 times hotter than normal for not bowing down to King Nebuchadnezzar and his golden images. They remained faithful to their God. But while in the fire,

they were not consumed by the flames. It was a miracle. A 4<sup>th</sup> person was found in the fire with them who had the appearance of God or an angel. Nebuchadnezzar heard that they survived and ordered them taken out of the fire and bowed down to their God for being in the fire with them and saving them.

This is who our God is. Isaiah 43 has the voice of God saying, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. Then in verse 4: “Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you. Or in verse 5 “Do not fear, for I am with you.” It reminds of the hymn “You are mine”. No matter what you are going through, the times you are feeling lost or alone, God is smack dab in the middle of the fire with you. We are fragile people and we will still get hurt, we will be changed. But we can be assured of God’s presence with us as we are going through it. God longs for restoration for all of us.

Then in our Gospel we have water and fire images and the voice of God. John the Baptist knew his role. It was to prepare people to meet Jesus. John knew he wasn’t the messiah. He could have gotten all puffed up with his earthly success. But John said like Wayne and Garth in Wayne’s world, “Instead of we’re, I’m not worthy”. Worthy to untie the thong of Jesus’ sandals. John baptized with water, but Jesus will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. I think of the tongues of fire at the first Pentecost when a tongue of fire rested on each person and the Holy Spirit gave them gifts each according to their own ability.

In Jesus’ baptism, we once again have a God who is willing to be like us in every way... to stoop down to our level. Jesus, who knew no sin, entered John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Why would Jesus do this? He is one of us. On the cross it is clear, the one who knew no sin took on all of our sin in order to redeem us.

During Jesus’ baptism Luke has Jesus praying, and the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. And the voice of God said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus’ identity as God’s Son is affirmed.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do not be afraid. In our baptism God says, I love you and you are mine, and I am with you always. Keep the faith. Trust in me. I will see you through. Amen.