

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#)

[Psalm 72:1-7](#)

[Romans 15:4-13](#)

[Matthew 3:1-12](#)

Sermon for 12/4/2022

THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are children of God.

All the gospel accounts pay tribute to John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus, as the man who in some sense brought one age of the human race to a conclusion, and paved the way for a new age for the human race, the age in which we now live. And with Christmas now upon us, this is the perfect time to think about what the difference between those two ages is.

The third chapter of Matthews's gospel gives us his version of this beginning of a new age. So let's read it together.

Matthew 3: 1-12.

The image that John the Baptist himself uses to represent this transition from the old to the new age is the image of baptism, and John's way of putting it is to say that while he baptizes with water, the one who is to come will baptize with the holy spirit and with fire. But what does that mean?

The answer, or at least the beginning of an answer, can be found in something that the apostle John wrote in his gospel. In his third chapter, we find what may be the most extraordinary verse in the entire Bible, the verse that we all know by heart, the verse that contains in a few words the essence of the entire Good news, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. John wrote: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”*

We are all part of God's creation. The Bible itself teaches that God made man and woman in his own image. Abraham, King David, Moses, Elijah and the virgin Mary were all creations of God; so also were Caesar and Confucius and the Buddha and Alexander and Plato and Socrates creations of God. But there has only been one child who was begotten by God: the one who was born in a manger in Bethlehem once upon a midnight clear.

Begotten by God. What does that mean?

We don't use words like begetting and begotten much anymore, but we still know what they mean. To beget is to become the parent of; whereas to create is to make. And what is the difference? When you beget, you produce something of the same kind as yourself. A woman begets little babies; a squirrel begets little squirrels; a hippopotamus begets little hippopotami. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A squirrel makes a little vault for nuts in a tree. A hippopotamus makes waves when it lifts its snout out of the water. A woman makes a quilt to hang in a church.

Or a woman, if she's a sculptress instead of a quiltress, might make a statue, something that looks much more like herself than a quilt does. If she's a really good sculptress, she might make something that looks very much like a human being. But of course, it's not a real human being, no matter how lifelike it may appear, because it's not alive. It doesn't think or dream or gossip the way she does. It's not begotten of her, it's made by her.

And in the same way, what God begets is God, is of God; what God creates is not God. A statue may have the shape of a woman, but it's not a woman. In the same way, a woman may have the shape or likeness of God – be created in the image of God – but she has not got the kind of life God has. She is created by God, but not begotten of God.

Do you begin to see the difference now? Jesus is the only begotten child of God, the only one who shares the substance, the reality, the life of God.

“And God so loved the world – his creation – that he gave his only begotten child, that his created children – you and me – might share the life of God: that his own life – God's own life, God's own reality, God's own substance – might enter into us.

And how does that happen? Well, let's return to our reading from Matthew this morning:

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is how God puts his own nature into you, and the ability for God to provide - and for you to receive - that baptism is what Jesus came to provide, and what he succeeded in providing on the cross. When he cried out in his final words on the cross --- It is accomplished! --- that's what 'It' referred to, that's what Christ accomplished: to enable every human being to experience a new birth, a birth from above, and thereby becoming, no longer simply a creation, but a truly begotten child of God.

Here's how Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans:

¹⁴ For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba,^[e] Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...

Does that mean that I'm a begotten child of God? you might be asking yourself. The answer is yes. But then you might be asking yourself, Why don't I feel more important? Why do I still make mistakes? Why aren't I as good a person as I could be?

The answer to that, I think, is the true meaning of the fire that John the Baptist mentions in our reading, the fire that will accompany the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Back when I worked in the forest service, one thing I often saw was how, a few years after a fire had swept over a section of a forest, the trees that had survived the fire often grew back bigger and healthier and stronger than they had been before, once the dead and decaying trees and underbrush that had crowded the forest floor had been consumed by the fire.

In the same manner, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, even if painful at first, is really the beginning of a process that, over time, will result in a new and better and stronger creation.

Jesus himself gives us other images to represent that heavenly revitalization, teaching in parables, as he always did.

The kingdom of God, he once told us, may be compared to a woman putting leaven into a lump of dough, which then begins the long process of converting all of the dough. Using this image, we may say that Jesus is the woman, you are the dough, and the leaven is the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 13) The dough never realizes it's being transformed, even while the slow and patient leaven works its way through. And in our cases, the leaven has an eternity to work its transformation: there's no rush.

In another parable, Jesus gives us the image of the mustard seed, slowly and surely being transformed into the greatest and most wondrous of plants. How does that happen in nature? By the tiny mustard seed ever so slowly drawing its nourishment from the rotting and decaying matter of the soil, enriched by the destruction of what has died before.

One thing we can be sure of: when we get to heaven, we'll find it's filled with very old and very magnificent trees.

To bring this full circle, let's look at the stained glass windows with which we're surrounded. Here on the left, we see the very beginning, the Christmas beginning with the annunciation to Mary. And as we move from one window to the next, we see the different stages of the life of Jesus, the birth, the ministry, the miracles, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. And then we come to the last window, the window that represents what it was all leading to.

The great event of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended like flames of fire on the disciples in the Upper Room was, as it were, the great sacramental celebration of this gift of the Holy Spirit to all who are willing to receive it by turning their lives over to Christ.

In the sacramental celebration we will turn to in a moment, we celebrate the same thing: the great gift of his own spirit that Christ has given to each of us.

So let's close with a prayer that we remain always mindful that we are truly begotten children of God, in everything we say and everything we do, and that we remain always mindful that this new birth from above is Christ's gift to each of us, as we offer this prayer in his name.