

January 9, 2022
Baptism of Our Lord

“Healthy Fear”

Luke 3:15-22

This is what John the Baptizer proclaims: *“I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

What’s strange is that after quoting these words so obviously professing a coming divine judgment upon mankind, Luke follows with, *“So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.”*

Good news? Did Luke not pay attention to the “burn with unquenchable fire” part? It makes you wonder.

Of course I jest...kind of. It is good news John is proclaiming. The baptism John is doing on folks is for the forgiveness of sins of those who repent in faith. In such faith they stand right with God, justified, declared “not guilty”, and thus will stand in the judgment, being the wheat that is saved and not the chaff that is burned. The means of said forgiveness is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who John himself baptizes not for forgiveness, but that all things might be done rightly in this true man, true God.

But St. Luke’s strange phraseology kind of backhandedly reflects a horrible misconception that exists in the church today. A recent Pew Research poll reflects that 29 percent of mainline protestant Christians don’t believe in hell! Another 11 percent aren’t really sure about it! That’s 40 percent who think John might be bluffing about the unquenchable fire!

How can this be? Scripture is clear. Jesus is clear! How many of His parables end with the outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth? He talks explicitly about hell and unquenchable fire! How can people who claim belief in Christ and God’s revealed Word deny the existence of the reality of condemnation and hell?

Easy answer—people’s sinful nature likes sin and if you remove hell from the mix, sin just isn’t so bad. So people make themselves a god over God, redefine Him into a feeble old grandpa in heaven who dotes on His children and would never ever do anything mean or nasty to them, at least nothing as final as condemnation and hell. And their basis for doing so is absolutely nothing biblical; the Bible is too clear about hell and condemnation for that. No, the rationale is something along the lines of, “Well I just can’t accept a God who would be so judgmental.” In other words, “I just can’t handle a God who holds me accountable for my sin.”

This is idiotic. This is like stepping off a skyscraper because you don’t want to believe that gravity is so mean that it would allow birds to fly and not you. This is making God into your own image and you are patently stupid. Yet apparently a good chunk of Christians are perfectly willing to pick up their Bible, take a sharpie to the scores and scores of references to divine judgment and hell, and walk down this road saying the chaff being burned with unquenchable fire is nothing to worry about.

But before we pat ourselves on the back for knowing better, let’s ask ourselves if we really do know better. We may not go the route of blatantly denying the clear reality of condemnation and hell, but do we make the same move? Do we, because of the reality of forgiveness of sins obtained by Christ through the cross and tomb, turn around and say with our attitude and actions, “My sins aren’t really anything to worry about too much because Jesus took care of that whole problem. God doesn’t really care about those sins so much anymore.”?

People, worry about your sins!

Sometimes I think I preach too much Gospel. Because of our Lutheran history of freeing the Gospel from its captivity in bad Roman Catholic Church doctrine, we always make sure to emphasize the wonderful grace of God in which He freely forgives our sins. That is good and right so to do. But I think we may do it so much that folks start believing that because of divine grace sin doesn't really matter anymore.

Sin matters! Sin brings the unquenchable fire! St. Paul is preaching Gospel but screaming that sin still matters when he writes, *"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"*

We can't! We can't live in it. Baptized into Christ we have died to sin and now live in the holiness of Jesus Himself! St. Paul is pretty clear about what has happened to us in baptism: *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."*

We stand raised from the death of our sins to holy life in God—the stone sealing our tomb has been rolled away and we stand in new, eternal life. But if we embrace our sins, make room for them, get comfortable with them—they are the bricks by which we build a wall sealing ourselves back in the tomb of death once again. In holding on to our sins we are despising the Holy Baptism that washed them away and in doing so rejecting the blessed water that extinguishes the judgment's unquenchable fire.

Our Father in heaven is not some feeble and docile doting grandfather who in tender love accepts us just as we are—if that were the case we wouldn't need a Savior, would we? In His love He sent Jesus for a singular purpose; to remove the sins which kept us from dwelling in His holy presence. That deed stands accomplished by the cross and empty tomb so St. Paul can assure us that *"if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."* This Gospel good news is sweet and true and guarantees our salvation. But note the "if". If we stand united with him. What breaks that union? Uniting with the sin of this fallen world instead. And that's real, real easy to do if you're thinking sin is no big deal.

This is a strange sermon because I am literally trying to scare the hell out of you. If you are embracing sin, I want you to be lying sleepless on your pillow at night thinking about the unquenchable fire. Quite frankly, even if you aren't embracing sin I want you to consider the possibilities and be afraid. Jesus told His believing disciples, *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* So yes, hear John preach of unquenchable fire and tremble—condemnation and hell are very, very real.

In that healthy fear then, run to your Savior. Turn away from those sins in fear, in shame, in repentance, and flee to your Holy Baptism in which judgment and death have already claimed you, yet Christ has raised you to new, holy and everlasting life. Know that you stand apart from sin with Christ and glory in that blessed reality that God's grace has created of you.

"For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Hell is a real thing. Condemnation is a real thing. Pay attention to the "unquenchable fire" part. Sin is a very big deal if you are not dead to it. But for those who stand dead to sin in Christ it can do nothing to separate you from God. So daily die to sin in your baptism. In your fear run to Jesus, and stand forever saved by His grace.

Amen.