

Baptism

Baptism is an assurance of your place in God's family, it's a promise of God's grace. Do you live in that grace or do you struggle to accept forgiveness?

A beautiful friend of mine, named Millie, struggled with grace. Millie was a member of an online contemplative Christian fellowship group that I am still a part of. It is loosely affiliated with a Lutheran church in silver spring. Every other week, Millie, myself, and six other women meet and reflect on our walks with the Lord.

Millie passed away more than a year ago. But, before that, she was a vibrant member of our fellowship. She was in her mid-90's and not quite as adept with zoom as the rest of us. She would log into the meeting and struggle with the camera and the microphone. Often we could only see the top of her forehead. Millie loved our group and we loved Millie. Millie was a loving, caring, baptized believer who struggled deeply with guilt and shame. She regularly wondered aloud if the promise of her baptism would hold, if she had been truly made right with Jesus, if she would make it to heaven.

Millie isn't the only person I've encountered who doubted their eternal destination.

Perhaps there's a seed or even a large mature redwood tree of doubt in your mind. If so, try this exercise with me. It is important to be completely honest in your answer to the following questions:

Do you want to be with Jesus? Does the thought of spending time in Jesus' presence fill you with joy? You're at church today, so you probably have at least a partial "yes" in your heart. But maybe, like Millie, you want to be filled with joy but instead you are afraid Jesus wouldn't accept you and certainly couldn't love you.

Peter proclaims in Acts that everyone who believes in Jesus will receive forgiveness for their sins. This forgiveness is demonstrated in the Gospels. First, there's the story of the prodigal son who is embraced with abundant joy by his father. Second, we have the criminals crucified on either side of Jesus. One was acutely aware his crimes were deserving of death, but he bravely asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus responded that on that very day the man would be with him on the other side. That's all it takes. If you truly desire to be in Jesus' presence, to be in right relationship with your creator, you will be with Jesus for eternity.

And yet there are times we doubt ourselves. We need to be reminded of our baptism. We need to be reminded that nothing can separate us from God's love, that we are holy in his sight.

Baptism is a washing clean of the old self. Just as we shower to wash away the dirt and the grime from the day, our souls need cleansing from all that we pick up along life's journey. We

need regular showers in God's forgiveness to keep our hearts open to His love. This is why we regularly renew our baptismal promises, to remind ourselves of both our commitment to love and follow God and God's promise to run to us like the father in the story of the prodigal son anytime we turn to him, to wrap his arms around us and welcome us home.

And so, though our guilt and shame may temporarily paralyze us, they don't ultimately keep us from God.

Theologically speaking, we have established our confidence of where Millie is now. But, we have a bit more to go on. Millie's daughter Barbara was in Millie's room the day that she passed on. Barbara's family asked Millie to send them a sign from heaven to communicate with them that she crossed over okay. Just before Millie took her last breath, Barbara noticed a ladybug crawling on her own shirt, which then flew over and landed on her mother's forehead. Over the past year plus, on important days such as Millie's birthday or the anniversary of her passing or when someone is in need of some encouragement or guidance, Barbara and her daughters stumble across ladybugs. So it seems that, despite her doubts, Millie found her way to heaven.

The promise of baptism is enough. If we live in the full heart knowledge of our Baptismal covenant with God, we can boldly live in grace.

But there's another level of baptism that is all over Scripture, the way that Jesus baptizes: with the Holy Spirit and fire. Water washes us clean, but fire changes on a chemical level. The fire of the Holy Spirit doesn't just clean us up, it changes us to the core. This is more than just putting faith in our salvation and trying to be a loving person. It is more than just believing in Jesus and hanging out at church. It is about taking on the mind and heart of Christ.

You see, we limit what God can do in and through us. We limit what we can become. Jesus did not limit us. The words of Christ point us beyond our sin to an elevated state. Perfect? Perhaps not in this life. But far more pure and more powerful than what we allow ourselves to believe. Why else would Jesus promise at the Last Supper that we would do greater things than he did?

This level of transformation can't happen with John's baptism. You need more than just a washing up to become what Jesus invites us to be. In Matthew Chapter 11, Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest of those born of woman but below anyone born of the kingdom of heaven. The way Jesus lays out for us lifts our souls higher than John could reach without this path. And John himself, in Matthew Chapter 3, just before today's gospel reading, explains that Jesus would bring a superior type of baptism, baptism with both the Holy Spirit and fire. Yes, Jesus was going to bring a baptism that brought full transformation. And then came the line that used to scare me: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, says John, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

I don't believe we need to be afraid by this verse but rather empowered. I don't think any person's soul can be chaff. But I do believe that there are parts of each of us that are wheat and parts that are chaff. And John is proclaiming that this chaff can and must be burned away so that we can become all the Jesus called us to be.

Jesus came to show us the way. He taught us the path by walking it himself. First, like us, he underwent John's baptism, cleansing himself before God. Then, as he comes up from the water, God's voice is heard, declaring His love for Jesus. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". I hope that you, like Jesus, can hear those words spoken by God over you today as well. Finally, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, beginning the second baptism.

This is our path as well. As we allow God to cleanse us, to rinse off all that separates us from God, we too are able to hear God's declaration of love over us. And, should we desire to be transformed utterly by God, the Holy Spirit enters in and begins to cleanse us by fire. He will clear the threshing floor of your heart, gathering what is true and beautiful in you, what is in God's image, and burn, yes, utterly destroy the chaff, that which has no more value in you.

Not everyone receives this baptism by fire. It is a gift of God available to all of us but that must be accepted whole-heartedly to be received. It is the result of falling deeply in love with God. So in love, that our hearts burn within in joy at the nearer presence of the divine. It is God's love that transforms us, a fire that burns and transforms us into the highest and best version of ourselves, the self that we were created to be. This baptism, this change to the very core of who we are, may come with significant trial and pain. Yet the love for God makes these trials joyful to bear.

Though I haven't experienced this personally, at least not on the same level, the saints speak of a literal fire of love that burns from within.

Therese of Lisieux experienced this fire of love, which she called the Seraph's assault. The name was something she had heard from St. John of the Cross, who taught that when a person's soul is set ablaze with love for God, their heart is pierced by an arrowhead or spear on fire with love, given, he believed, by an angel.

As Therese describes this fire,

I don't know how to express this burning. There is no comparison to understand the intensity of this flame from Heaven. One second more and I would surely be dead.

St. Gemma Galgani explains

It is a mysterious fire that comes from within, then goes to the outside. **It is, however, a fire that does not torment me, rather it delights me, but it also exhausts and consumes me."**

Baptism by fire does to the soul what celebration of life services do to the story of the soul. I went to a celebration of life Friday night for a neighbor, Sue. Family and friends recounted stories of her kindness and love as a wife, mother, and grandmother. They told of her co-founding of a charity with her dad's Liberian hospice care nurse. The charity was responsible for freeing a town in Liberia from poverty and providing the residents means for continued self-sufficiency. Any chaff from this beautiful woman's life were forgotten that night. Only the stories of love remained. Despite the stories only being about love, her unique personality still shown through. Friends told of laughter filled walks, her love for high altitude hikes, and her buying a wedding dress a couple years before her husband proposed because it was a deal she couldn't pass up on.

This is what the Holy Spirit's fire of love does to our souls. He burns away our resentments, our selfishness, our fears, and our unwillingness to trust and leaves only love and those fun bits that are uniquely "us".

Jesus, as in all parts of His life, guided the way in this transformation . That's why the Spirit drove Jesus to the wilderness. He was to separate from the world for a time to be refined for God's service. When he returned, as Acts 10 shares, he had power to bring others back to God, to "heal all who were oppressed by the devil."

And, so can we. When we are baptized by fire, we are transformed, a process that happens over the course of our entire lives, and, I suspect, beyond this lifetime. We live in the grace of our baptism by water, bask in the love of God for us, and, once refined by the passion we have for God in our hearts, are blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The women I walk with in my online group are all-in on this walk of transformation, this baptism by fire. We each clearly hear the voice of the Spirit and seek to be remade into the image of Christ. And, just as the Bible promises in first Corinthians, the Spirit manifests in us all differently. Among us there are prophets, spiritual counselors, and teachers.

{I have prophetic dreams, hear the Spirit's voice clearly, and am a spiritual teacher. Jean sees spiritual truth in pictures and, paints them in our minds when she speaks of them. She also a beautiful voice and sings weekly for her church. Pat, very much the intellectual of the group, researches the ins and outs of the readings we share. She's read every footnote, and researched the background of each writer and enlightens us with her wisdom. Carol serves as both a nurse and a spiritual director, helping others to see the work of the Spirit in their lives. Barbara, Millie's daughter, is one of the shepherds of her church. She knows almost everyone, but not in the small southern town way. Rather, she sees the light in everyone and celebrates the soul of everyone she meets. Leslie is a bit quieter, but has great spiritual power. She is a prayer warrior and clearly hears the voice of the Spirit. We talk on the phone each Thursday afternoon, and, before I shared with her anything about this sermon, which I already had the outline for, she told me about how she felt God calling her to do 2 things: embrace grace and pursue the spirit enthusiastically, being open to the full power of God within her. I guess the conversation with God was on speaker phone. This was the confirmation I needed to confidently move forward with the sermon}

I started this sermon by sharing about Millie, who taught us of the power of the covenant of our baptism by water. I will end with Marilee, who is a living example of the power of baptism by fire. To me, she demonstrates best the level of glory we can bring God when set on fire by the Spirit. Marilee has served for 25 years as the faith community nurse at her church. She cares for all in the church in times of grief and illness, but also in times of the birth of little ones, rehabilitation from injury, and the administration of flu shots and blood pressure checks. She organizes meals, rides, medical equipment, and prayer.

When I asked her about her direct experiences of the Spirit, she noted her calling 25 years before to become the parish nurse. As she pushed back on the job being a good fit for her skill set as a career pediatrics nurse, the hymn “God calling yet, shall I not hear” popped in her head, and she knew her answer would be yes.

As she interacts with parishioners in person and over the phone, she says that what she speaks throughout the day is simply “given” to her by the Spirit. And often, so too is medical equipment. Quite frequently, someone will call for a piece of more rare equipment, such as a sit to stand. Within hours, someone, without anyone knowing about the request, will drop one off at the church office. Marilee says she doesn’t actively pray for these requests to be answered, she and those who minister with her simply trust that God will fulfill all requests according to His will.

St. Andrew calls her the “heart” of their church, and I suspect the loving energy she brings is one of the main reasons for the church’s continued growth over the past 45 years, that is, the entirety of her time there. The church adds 50 new members every couple months. Marilee’s heart is one of the main reasons I stayed at St. Andrew even when I lived 30 minutes away.

She is the quietest in our contemplative group, but we all know intuitively who the GOAT is. Her faith is simple, that childlike faith Jesus asks us to have. She trusts God implicitly. She prays without words, knowing that God will meet His children’s needs, not her wants. And she speaks of the “we” who serves in the church. She is acutely aware that she does nothing alone. God works through her and those who minister with her. Marilee is the closest thing to a miracle worker I have personally witnessed.

To many, Marilee is a saint. Rarely if ever speaking ill of a soul, serving with joy, and, through the power of God’s love, providing the heartbeat for a vibrant congregation and miracles to serve their needs.

Thus is our invitation today. In part in the words of Leslie, Embrace the grace of your baptism and be energized by it. Hear the voice of the Father telling you that you are His beloved child and He is pleased with you. Open your heart in joy and be open to the full power of His love in your life. Be baptized by both water and fire, this day, and always. Amen.