Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Welcome to the Season after Epiphany. Christmas is over. The angels have returned to heaven. The shepherds are back in their fields. The wise men are headed home. Now we prepare for the Bishop Candidates Walkabout and the Super Bowl. But the church calls us to something other than candidate scrutiny and tailgate parties. During this season after Epiphany, we are invited to reflect upon some other important events: Jesus’ baptism, the wedding feast at Cana a miraculous catch of fish. And on the seventh and final Sunday after Epiphany, we will retell the vision of Jesus being transfigured and speaking with Moses and Elijah. These Gospel narratives are epiphanies, revelations, sudden intuitive perceptions about who this Jesus really is.

For us in the 21st century, in an at least nominally Christian culture, it is hard to be surprised by these revelations. We know who Jesus is. For most of us, we have lived our whole lives hearing these stories read year after year. And yet there do come those moments in which we are startled by what we hear, by what we perceive, by what we experience about this Jesus. That is what this season after Epiphany is all about: taking time to reflect on who Jesus is and then being transformed ourselves into a more perfect reflection of Jesus’ presence here in the world today.

Today’s reading from Luke marks a transition in Jesus’ story line from the various narratives surrounding his birth, to stories about his ministry. John the Baptist had been preaching that the Messiah was near at hand, that salvation was ready to break forth, that it was time to repent and be baptized. The people were excited and eager to know who this Messiah was. They wanted clear answers, but John gave them only vague images. I am not worthy to untie his sandals. The Messiah will come with spirit and fire. He will gather the grain and destroy the stubble.

In Luke’s retelling of Jesus’ story, John the Baptist doesn’t point out the Messiah, God does, as we heard today. After being baptized, Jesus was praying and the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and God spoke: “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Luke doesn’t tell us if the crowds saw or heard this epiphany, or even if they reacted. Luke does explain, however, in the following chapters of his Good news, what Jesus did after this manifestation and how Jesus’ actions affected not only those seeking the Messiah, but the whole world, up to this present moment.

What I pondered this week about this good news story was the image that John the Baptist used about being baptized “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” We in California know how deadly and devastating fire can be. But we also need to remember the good that fire can produce: light in the darkness, warmth in the cold, the refining of basic ore into precious metals. So what do you think John the Baptist was referring to when he said that the chaff will burn with unquenchable fire? I imagine this chaff to be our self-centered attitudes, our hurtful thoughts and words, anything that separates us from each other and from God. And the unquenchable fire is God’s love for us, burning away all our imperfections.

I believe that one of the ongoing effects of our baptism is that all this stuff that keeps us from loving God above all else and from loving our neighbors as much as ourselves, can be burnt away.

God’s love calls us and supports us in putting off our old ways and putting on the new, in trading in our hearts of stone for hearts of flesh, in dying to ourselves so that we may rise with Jesus for others. As Martin Luther wrote, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun, and ever to be continued.”

How many of you remember the day of your baptism? How fortunate you are. For most of us who were baptized as infants, we can only get a sense of the meaning of those words and actions when we are present at someone else’s baptism. I can theorize and philosophize about the meaning of baptism, but my baptism doesn’t have that feeling of reality for me as does my first communion or ordination or marriage. I remember those events. I know that they took place. I have my own stories to tell about them. But as for my baptism, I have to take it on faith that not only were the words spoken and the water poured, but also that the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit came down and somehow I was transformed. Isn’t that what we believe, that baptism not only initiates us into the church through human words and actions, but that it also reveals our true being as God’s creation, God’s beloved?

Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; God’s favor poured upon us, unearned and undeserved. God has loved us from the beginning of creation. And God’s love is focused on each one of us, by name. It's as if God is trying to say to each of us: No matter how low and discouraged you might feel, no matter what has happened in your life, no matter what the current challenges are, don't ever let anyone tell you that you are anything but my precious and beloved child. Baptism is a blessing and a gift that acknowledges, manifests, reveals that we are filled with God’s favor and love. And with this great gift comes the responsibility to live each day in a way that befits someone beloved by God. Each day we can point to the one who is the source of our salvation, a light to enlighten all nations, the one whose sandals we are not worthy to untie.

Each day we can throw the chaff of our lives into the fire of God’s love and strive again and again to live out our baptismal covenant. Each day we can do as Jesus taught us, praising God and serving one another.

As faith-filled followers of Jesus, let us now stand and renew our Baptismal Covenant.