SERMON 01-09-22: ST. MARK’S, DURANGO

Isaiah 43: 1-7; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

That people might have mistaken John the Baptist for the Messiah isn’t all that surprising. They were, after all, living in a time and place where messianic expectations were running high … where it was widely believed that a Messiah, someone from among them, would presently be anointed by God to bring judgement to the world … and that, when he did appear, nothing more would matter for them except whether they would be judged to have been good, or bad, in this life … with the good rising to eternal life and the bad falling into eternal damnation.

John’s message must have seemed reassuring to many of them … especially those who, being aware of the stringent requirements for “goodness” that were imposed by the Law (with all its intricacies) and their own inability to live up to those requirements, had either fallen away or were left wondering if the “good” that was in them would outweigh the “bad” that was in them when the books were opened for the final judgement … or maybe just wondering, anxiously, what they still must do to be saved.

The message was simple: What they needed to do was undergo a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins …

Had this simple act been all that was needed to exempt them from the impending judgement, John might well have been hailed as the Messiah. BUT, as he warned them, his was not the only baptism that they would face … that one who was much more powerful than he would still be coming … to baptize with fire … and, with winnowing fork and unquenchable fire at hand, to bring judgement to the world.

[PAUSE]

It is into this uncertain time, between the promise of repentance, through baptism by water, and the certainty of judgement, through baptism by fire, that John’s successor … the one more powerful than he … finally arrives.

John, by this time, must have had some idea of what to expect when his successor finally arrived.

What he probably wasn’t expecting was his cousin, Jesus … not only because of his familiarity … he had, after all, known him since before either of them had been born … but also because he was among those who were coming to him to be baptized … something that would *never* have been expected for someone who has been anointed by God to bring judgement to the world.

[PAUSE]

An answer to this perplexing question, of why Jesus would need baptism, may be found in John’s promise that the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit as well as with fire. That Jesus will someday return to bring judgement to the world is well-understood, from goodly portions of Scripture. Yet in the time between his baptism by John, with water, and his still-awaited return, to baptize with fire, he is to baptize with the Holy Spirit … something that, unlike baptism by water or fire, is an ongoing presence … one that will remain with us and empower us … and one that he can only receive, and give, through his life among us.

We see it in the promise, from Isaiah, that:

 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

 when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

 and the flame shall not consume you.

We also see it at work in the life of Jesus, as well as the life of the Church.

For Jesus, the Holy Spirit has been with him ever since conception. Yet once he is baptized by John, and is afterwards praying, it descends forcefully upon him … giving him affirmation (as God’s beloved son) and direction (as God’s servant). Empowered by the Spirit, he is then led into the wilderness … to have that power tested with offers of how it could (but shouldn’t) be used. After that, still empowered by the Spirit, he begins his ministry … a ministry that, unlike John’s, proclaims the good news … that the Kingdom of God, instead of impending doom … is at hand.

For the Church, the Holy Spirit is at least present from the time that the risen Christ breathes it onto the disciples. Yet it is only at Pentecost that it descends forcefully upon them … in a sound like the rush of a violent wind, divided tongues, as of fire, and an ability to speak in other languages … to form them as the Church. Empowered by the Spirit, the Church, at that very moment, begins its ministry.

[PAUSE]

As the Church, we continue to find empowerment through baptism with the Holy Spirit.

We begin with a baptism of repentance, with water, for the forgiveness of sins … including:

* What we have done to others
* What we have done to ourselves, and
* What others have done to us

… not as an end in itself, but what can be seen as the beginning of an ongoing baptism with the Holy Spirit … one that is sealed with a Baptismal Covenant, continues throughout our lives, empowers us in our ministry to others, and prepares us for the judgement that is to come.

What we affirm in the Baptismal Covenant can indeed be daunting, so much so that some will choose to defer baptism, even up to the point of death, or avoid it altogether. Yet we must remember that what is being asked of us is a challenge that we are to meet, not on our own, but in the company of the Holy Spirit.

[PAUSE]

In a few moments, we will once again affirm our baptisms … by answering the hard questions that are asked of each of us in the Baptismal Covenant:

 Will we continue in the apostles’ teaching?

 persevere in resisting evil?

 proclaim by word and example the Good News?

 strive for justice and peace?

To which, thanks be to the Holy Spirit, we can answer with:

 We will … with God’s help.

AMEN