

### Winnowing Fork

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Isaiah 43:1-7 (Courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

43:1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

43:2 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.

43:3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

43:4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

43:5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

43:6 I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth--

43:7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

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As you have noticed, today is the day in the church year when we contemplate the Baptism of Jesus, and in doing so, possibly remember our own. Not everyone can remember their Baptisms, so we are asked on this day to bring to life within us what baptism means to us. One *advantage* of our Disciples tradition of 'Believers Baptism' is that those who were *not* baptized as *infants* can actually remember their baptisms. But even so, remembering the actual ritual of Baptism doesn't always signify some greater religious experience.

I was *first* baptized when I was about 7 years old. We had just joined the Southminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio shortly after moving there from Indianapolis, IN - where we had moved to, less than a year before - from W. Lafayette, IN. I was the youngest of four kids and I remember *all four of us* being baptized, assembly line style, in a small chapel. One after the other of us Comingore kids were asked to announce our full name, and then Rev. McClelland would say, "I baptize you, bla bla bla, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," sprinkle a little water on our heads and then on to the next child. When it came my turn, I was so worried that I would forget to say my middle name, that I didn't say my last name. The Pastor paused, looked quizzically at my mother, who then added my last name, which thankfully matched the other 3 siblings' names and on he went with the ritual.

I was almost an adult when I thought about it again. I wondered why *none* of us had been baptized before, when all our lives we had gone to church and my brother was 6 years older than I. And I wondered why it was a kind of a secret, hidden away from the congregation in a solitary chapel, not on a Sunday. And I wondered why no one ever really talked to me about it, what it meant, why it was being done.

Well, my answers came while I was in seminary. I called my mother up to tell her about this great new denomination I had discovered all on my own and my mother said, "I know all about it honey, you were dedicated to God in a Disciples of Christ church when you were a Baby!" It seems we had all been dedicated to God in the Disciples tradition, but the two moves in one year sort of put off my brother's baptism; and by the time we had really settled

down, my parents had chosen the local Presbyterian Church because they had the best opportunities for children's Christian education – and *they* baptized babies! So as not to hinder our favorable reception with the other kids, all four of us were swept into the Chapel one weekend, secretly baptized and then sent on our merry ways to Wednesday evening Christian Ed and Sunday morning Bible study.

That was the first time I was baptized. The next *nine times* were by emersion. No, I did not read that wrong. I have been baptized about 10 times, I believe. It happened once in that chapel in Dayton, and nine times on one day, in some Disciples church somewhere in Lexington, Kentucky. I, being a tiny 113 lb., 5' 1" person, seemed to be the perfect size, for my colleagues in the practical arts of ministry course, to learn how to dunk 13 year olds. OK, it was just practice – but they did all the same stuff as in a normal baptism. So I have often wondered, what really happens as a result of this ritual?

Is the *ritual* a form of magic that when it happens something mystical is set into motion? Does it truly cleanse us of all our sins, once and for all? How does it connect us with the Holy Trinity God? What does it really signify?

One funny story in seminary was told by one of our professors, who said he had one candidate for baptism who was so nervous during the process that he left one arm, shot straight up in the air, while the rest of him was dunked, and everyone has been teasing him ever since that that one arm is still sinful.

The sacrament of Baptism means so many things. It is a true mystery of faith that reaches beyond our comprehension and yet is tangible in many ways. To begin to find out what Baptism means, let's start looking at our texts for today.

In the Gospel, in verse 17 we read, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor . . ." in reference to Jesus. In my dictionary the definition of *winnowing* is: to expose to the wind or air current so that chaff (lighter particles) are separated away; or to separate good from bad; or another definition is, to clear of worthless or inferior elements. One of Jesus' gifts of baptism then appears to be to help us to separate those parts of our lives that are fluff from the precious; bad from the good; worthless from the valuable.

It is really hard to take seriously being baptized into the name of our sacrificial brother, Jesus, and then to ignore those parts of our lives that are truly selfish, worthless fluff. I mean, one look at some wealthy, bleach blond, young woman, posing for the camera with her tiny white puppy in her arm, blowing kisses, and your first thought is never, "O look, what a serious young Christian woman!" Yet, when we see some young woman in overalls building a hut in Latin America somewhere, our first thought is, "she's on a church mission trip."

Recognizing our baptism, whether we remember it or not, means that we accept that we aren't in this world for only ourselves anymore. Christ reminds us in his actions, his teachings, and his Holy Spirit, that we can trust this Christian experience to winnow out those parts of our lives which are fluff, bad, or worthless. And this brings us into relationship with all of humanity. Superficial stuff flies away and never touches anyone or anything, but the valuable parts unite to become a strong and healthy greater unit. Like the grain that is left becoming an essential part of the bread of life.

That is what those of you who have accepted positions as officers in this congregation have also recognized. You are winnowing away the Chaff and working toward dedication your lives to the values of the Christian faith.

When we were baptized, we were baptized in the name of the trinity; God the father, his son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came like a dove of peace and said, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We all have a share in that. We all are beloved by God.

But it is hard sometimes to know this, deep in our hearts; to accept that we are, as we heard in Isaiah, "precious in [God's] sight, and honored." It is hard, at times, to see our Baptism as representing all that.

If we can remember it, one rarely recalls ascending doves, and holy promises. But each time there is a Baptism, ours or someone else's, there is an opportunity to start anew, by accepting the promises of life in Christ - through the Winnowing Fork which is always there. New life - emerging from the baptismal waters as if from the womb - being cleansed with the warmth of the Holy Spirit - being comforted with the promises of a benevolent Father - that is the mystery of the Sacrament of Baptism. These are the hopes that we can cling to at all times of life.

We are made up mostly of water, we can survive a long time without food, as long as we have water, and the earth is overwhelming made of water. Water, baptism, God, and humanity - we are one. Let us nourish ourselves on pure clean water, in body, heart, and soul. AMEN