

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I've been wondering about things all my life. Some of the time I can find answers and some of the time I can't. It wasn't until I got to seminary that I had the chance to ask a very learned theologian a question that had been bothering me for most of my adult life. For the life of me, I couldn't get anyone to tell me why, if Jesus was the Son of God and flawless and sinless, why did he present himself to John the Baptist for baptism? He was sinless! He didn't need to be cleansed. Well, the learned theologian didn't really answer my question either...at least not to my satisfaction. He said something along the lines of, "Well, it was the Jewish custom to be baptized for ritual cleansing and Jesus was a good Jew, so he followed all of the Jewish customs." Somehow that answer didn't quite do it for me. There has to be more to it than that! Jesus' baptism was a big deal. It's recorded in all four of the gospels. It can't be just a story documenting that he was a good Jew.

It wasn't until I started doing a little research to prepare this sermon that I hit upon a couple of explanations that made sense to me. Granted, Jesus was a law-abiding Jew who conformed to the practices and traditions of his religion. But that's not the only reason he came to be baptized. Think about it. He was both fully God and fully man. He was the Son of God and the Son of Adam. He was born *into* and *from* a tragically flawed world of systemic sin. It's everywhere. He can't escape it. He presented himself for baptism not just because he was a good Jew, but because he fully understood the implications of the incarnation. There was a human component inside of him. He had to wrestle with those sinful internal impulses just as we do. God used the occasion of Jesus' baptism to fill him with the Holy Spirit in a way that was visible to all who were present. The dove swooped down and descended upon Jesus. And the words God said were, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." According to the account recorded in the gospel of Luke, Jesus was the only one who heard these words. In the gospel of Matthew, everyone present heard them. When Jesus wrestled with internal temptations to evil, the qualifying difference is that he was the Son of God and had been filled from top to toe with the Holy Spirit. He was powerful enough to overcome those human impulses as he demonstrated to us over and over again throughout his ministry beginning with his temptation in the wilderness. In an arm wrestle with evil, Jesus wins...every time!

We all have this dual nature within us...these good impulses and these bad impulses. We all struggle with the negative side of things...with jealousy, or anger, or greed, or impatience, or

fear, or self-pity. We've all wrestled with these impulses and more to boot. We know they are real and we know they are not from God. On the other hand, we have these good impulses, what St. Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit which are love, joy, peace, contentment, faithfulness, self-control, kindness, generosity and patience. We all have all of these impulses as well and we wrestle with the negative ones on a regular basis. And we all have access to the Holy Spirit which we can tap into through prayer. Diligent, persistent, heartfelt, vulnerable and sincere prayer can change everything for us.

This internal battle reminds me of a story that is attributed to the Cherokee Indians as one of their legends. A young boy goes to his grandfather upset and angry because a friend has betrayed him and hurt him terribly and the friend has no remorse for his actions. The grandfather can sympathize. He tells his grandson that he's had those feelings before, too, so he understands. But the hate and the anger, he tells his grandson, won't make things any better. The hate and anger harm only the one who feels them. The one who has done the hurtful deed isn't harmed at all. It's like taking poison and then expecting your enemy to die. The grandfather explained to his grandson that he felt there were two wolves inside of him wrestling for control of his soul. One of the wolves is mean and angry. He fights all the time. He gets offended when no offense was intended. He's quarrelsome, full of self-pity, and unforgiving. The other wolf is self-confident. He's content most of the time. He is patient and kind. He forgives easily and doesn't carry grudges. He almost always finds life pretty pleasant. The grandson thought about the two wolves for a minute and then he said to his grandfather, "Which one wins?" The grandfather smiled and said, "The one I feed."

Which brings us back to the dual nature of Jesus Christ, who, by all accounts, fed only the good wolf. And unlike us, he resisted evil at every turn.

Now the crowd gathered at the River Jordan...also there to be baptized by John...is hyped about the idea that the Messiah is going to show up at any time. They're wondering if it's John the Baptist. But John squelches that idea right away. "I baptize you with water," he says, "but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand," John says, "to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

YIKES! That last line is one that will tempt most thoughtful preachers to gloss completely over it. It and other verses like it have been used by preachers to scare people into behaving themselves. Not exactly what Jesus taught us. He didn't scare people in order to bring them closer to God. But that brings us to another question I've had most of my adult life...and that is, if Jesus was willing to inhabit a human body and then die a terrifying and brutal death so that

he could redeem all of us; and if Jesus went out of his way to spend time with sinners; and if Jesus chose sinful and fallible people to be his closest companions, why is John telling us about the winnowing fork and the grain and the chaff being separated and the chaff being burned? How do we know whether we're the chaff or the grain?

Well, maybe it's not about separating the people into the good people and the evil people because there is good in the worst of us and there is bad in the best of us. The shaft of wheat is all one thing...grain covered by an unusable casing called chaff. In order to use the grain for nutrition, the chaff has to be stripped away. Maybe what John is telling us is that when Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and fire, he's going to proceed to strip away all the evil parts of us...the chaff...because what is valuable to Jesus is the grain...the good that is inside us. Maybe that refining fire is going to do just that. Maybe it's going to refine us. Maybe Jesus knows about these two internal wolves vying for our souls and he's giving us the Holy Spirit and fire so that we can feed the one that will ultimately bring us into complete alignment with God. Maybe Jesus is using his winnowing to separate out the good and evil *within* each of us...not separate us into the good people and the evil people. How much we have left may very well depend on which of those inner wolves we've been feeding all our lives.

Will it be painful to be refined? Probably. Any change is a little unnerving, even if it's one that we want and that we know is ultimately good. We are creatures of habit. We feel less anxious when we are surrounded by the familiar and we know all the rules. If Jesus strips part of us away...the chaff part...the evil part...and burns all of that up, we are left only with the good part. We are made fit for the kingdom of heaven.

And isn't that what the kingdom of God promises to be like? Aren't we told that in heaven there is no pain and there are no more tears. There is no illness and there is no death. There is no evil. There is life everlasting. And isn't that what the Good News is all about? Isn't that what we are told to proclaim to all the world? Jesus has come to rescue us from the internal wolf that would devour us. He's come to claim the good wolf within us. He's come to separate the grain...what is useful and nourishing...from the chaff...what is the outer shell that protects the grain but is worthless on its own. Our outer shells are not what God wants from us. It is our inner soul that God cherishes. It is our inner soul that God loves beyond all else. It is to our inner soul that God whispers, "You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.