

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Change is at the forefront of our Gospel lesson this morning. People are looking to John the Baptist as the messiah as they hope for change. John encourages and warns that there is one who is coming that far surpasses his own power.

This interesting tone is pretty relatable when we think about change. Change is almost always both exciting and stressful. Change intersects with hope and loss in a profound way that makes it easy to understand why we may either want to avoid change as much as possible or usher it in as quickly as possible. In the case of the people who have been suffering at the oppressive hand of the Romans, they are excited for potential change in their world.

There is change more profound than anyone can imagine taking place in the baptism that day. The water the John baptizes with does not seem so out of place or different. This is part of cleansing ritual in the Jordan, that is a blessing, a commitment to God, and a physical experience of the mercy God has for the people. A reminder of the forgiveness of sins. This ritual, this baptism, is part of a process that is familiar.

We too, are washed clean of sin in our baptism but we know this change is a process. This is a cycle that continues on and on. We die to sin every day but we

are made alive by the saving mercy of Jesus Christ. We are most familiar with change that happens in cycles. These changes occur all around us. The seasons change in cycle, our lives change in cycle, we've seen the cycle of rising cases of COVID followed by declines.

I brought with me something that has felt tangible to me this week of changes happening in cycles. Here I brought with me a football. Yes, yesterday, for the first time in my life, my favorite football team, the Cincinnati Bengals, won a playoff game. I've watched as that team changed; the players, coaches, the whole league has changed. Finally, last night, that daily shifting of players, development of talent, and training for the big day paid off in a big win.

This process will continue though. And even through all the loses, I enjoyed rooting for my team. The camaraderie, the excitement, the disappointment, and the hope for things to come is a cycle more important than any one day I could celebrate.

The cycles of our lives can be a constant reminder of our baptism. They give us daily courage to live in God's mercy and make small changes that can improve the cycles around us. Just as I hope each day to live as Christ did, I sin, and I try again the next to live into the covenant made at my baptism with God.

Ecological preservation and restoration seek to help facilitate the natural cycle of the Earth disrupted by greed and pollution. Jesus, as fully human, participates in this cycle of baptism that we live in when he's baptized by John.

John the Baptist mentions though that the messiah is coming to baptize not just with the water but with fire, the Holy Spirit. This is not a change within the cycle of our lives but a complete disruption. Something that totally breaks the cycle and bursts forth from it. This is the change that we both pine for and seek to avoid.

I brought another item along with me this morning one that represents this other kind of change that occurs in our baptism. I managed to hold off from eating this during the game last night... I brought popcorn.

Fire is an important part of the changing in this tasty treat. The kernel is heated and the popcorn literally burst forth from it. There's no going back to the kernel, this has been changed through the heat into something magnificent and new.

Jesus comes to Earth, enmeshed with the Holy Spirit and God, the Creator. The Spirit literally comes down as a dove during Jesus' baptism as a physical reminder that the Trinity is present as this sacrament takes place. The Holy Spirit binds us together as one body in Christ Jesus and ushers us into this completely new community. A transformed community, a baptized community.

We wrestle with the cycles of our lives each day but our purpose is changed forever. There's no way to separate ourselves from this love and mercy that surpasses all understanding. We make promises as those in our community are baptized that this person will be someone we are committed to caring, loving, and raising as best we can. We are transformed by baptism into a community of love, faith, and service that shifts our purpose from inward pursuit for ourselves to an outward pursuit for

God's will with our lives. Fire and Water, Mercy of God and Transformation of the Holy Spirit embodied in Christ, our Lord.

This is why, I imagine, in our reading from Acts, the apostles head out to the church in Samaria. The Apostles do not have possession over the Holy Spirit, allowed to doll it out when appropriate.

No, they are welcoming the church in Samaria into the broader Christian community. Helping them to see and feel the Holy Spirit at work in the Church, in their Baptism, and in their love for one another as one community. The Holy Spirit is present in the connectedness we share with one another, the transformation into family.

It's a lot of talk about moving pieces, change, and transformation. Fire and Water, two elements with a contradictory nature that combine into a sacrament of our faith. In many ways, this act of baptism is a reminder of how Jesus himself is such a wonderful mystery. Both fully human and fully God. I think it would be easier if we could get a formula sheet or the right concentration but instead, we are left in the mystery of faith that gathers us in, leaves us in wonder every day, and transforms us into new community with one another.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr Day. Many of us will have time off work or participate in learning about the Civil Rights Leader. While we do often read quotes or watch videos of his amazing speeches, MLK and other Civil Rights leaders truly embody the baptismal promise in their work. Their work lives in both the everyday

cycles of life and lifting up where they are broken as well as the need for transformation in the world.

A focus on racism, and the cycles of violence, poverty, and death that it creates. A passion for improving the systems that empower hatred and action that confronts the cycles of racism where it resides in every day life. Yet, at the same time, searching and fighting for transformation. Envisioning and working towards a world that would be unrecognizable to the one that we have lived in so engrained with white supremacy and other forms of oppression. Radical welcome into a movement for justice and love for neighbor that contrasted so sharply the powers of sin that would seek to separate.

As baptized people of God, we are called into a new purpose, to strive for justice, love one another, and reflect the grace that God freely offered us. We are gathered in community with Jesus and we are called to be His church. To be the body of Christ in the world.

Let us pray. Thank you, God for the opportunity each day to be a part of the world and to be transformed in our baptism by you. You are a God of mystery but you bless us with faith in you that goes beyond all knowledge. Let us be cleansed by your Holy water and transformed by your Holy fire. Let the Spirit guide us in all that we do. Amen.