

**Sermon for January 14, 2018 (Baptism of Christ / Epiphany2B) "Fire and Water"**  
*(Based on Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11 and John 1:43-51)*

Sometimes, working with the Bible is like working with fire. I mean that in the best and worst sense of what fire can do: it can bring warmth and light, and it can burn beyond the boundaries you've set, into places carefully kept in shadow, blazing into places you didn't want disturbed.

There were two choices of readings from the Common Lectionary, the set of readings we share with Christians of almost every stripe, in almost every part of the world. There were the readings for the second Sunday of Epiphany, which I read and then rejected. They just seemed a little harsh for a church family where I see respect and compassion embodied so beautifully. I could have ditched the Lectionary completely, but I opted for the other set of readings, the ones that focus on the baptism of Jesus.

I don't know how it is for you, but I'm a person who needs New Years. I love to revisit this story of Jesus, making his way through the crowds of other baptism-seekers, joining all the other folks hungry to make a change, to let their old ways and old sins drown in that muddy water and embrace the hope and promise of new life with God's help. I'm in that crowd, a crowd full of people from all over Judea who were drawn to John's message and the power of that ritual of death and rebirth we call baptism. Pastor Patricia Raube puts it this way:

...They wanted a fresh start. John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance, for forgiveness of sins. This wasn't a rite of initiation, in which you joined John's church. This was people of every variety, from the most poor and humble to the most rich and powerful, and all of them wanted pretty much the same thing: they wanted a new beginning. They wanted to turn their lives around. They wanted to put off their old ways, shed them like a beat-up, moth-eaten coat with holes in the pockets and frayed hems and stains on the lapel, and they wanted to put on new ways, God's ways. Think what it's like to take a shower in the morning, when you had a rough day the day before, or maybe a rough night. They wanted to feel new again, clean again, hopeful again.

I look around at the dirt and ashes scattered on the rotten snow, and I think about all the stress and sadness of the past year, and I want what John the Baptist's got. I want those "Crashing Waters At Creation." I want to wade into that water and just wash it all away, come out all clean and just start over. Anyone with me on this?

And then news came of an immigration policy meeting at the Oval Office earlier this week, and the vulgar racist language with which the president dismissed Haiti and all 54 countries in the African continent. He questioned why our nation should accept anyone from any of these places, and suddenly all I could hear was the voice of Nathanael. Do any of you know who Nathanael was? Well, he shows up in the other set of readings for this Sunday. In the Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Epiphany, from the first chapter of John, starting at verse 43, it says,

"The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nathanael hears his workmates speaking of someone outside their circle—someone who wants in. He hears the intensity and the passion in their voices, and he dismisses them, mocks them, because Jesus comes from—you know—one of those holes. Can anything good come out of Haiti, or El Salvador, or Puerto Rico, or ... Nazareth? Nathanael almost shuts himself off from the chance to walk with Jesus, to live with him and learn from him, to know personally the radical power of his love, because of this one thing: his willingness to dismiss another human being because of where they're from. What saves him? What draws him in? Three simple words, offered by his friend Philip. When Nathanael asks, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip doesn't join him in his dismissal, or in his cynical laughter. He doesn't treat it as a

joke. He offers another choice, an invitation beyond Nathanael's preconceived notions. It's offered in three small words: "Come and see."

See, people need community, like we need water and fire. What would have happened to Jesus, if he'd just walked into the Jordan and let the waters close over him, without his cousin John there to lift him back up into new life? Nathanael was floundering. Philip takes the burning torch of prejudice out of Nathanael's hand and holds it up, to shine light from a new perspective. And that light shows just how small Nathanael's circle has been, and how limiting. Richard Rohr, the great Christian mystic and spiritual teacher, says, "the truth shall make you free, but first it will make you miserable." Before I can step beyond my self-imposed limits, before I can take off my own blinders, I have to become aware of my problem. And that's the hardest space to inhabit: that space where I finally see the problem, but no way to fix it. After years of avoiding it because it was too painful to see, to painful to see the pain I've caused others. If I have to inhabit that space alone, I run the risk of jumping into the abyss of despair. But if I do it in partnership with others, my honest recognition is supported by other arms, and I can begin to make a change. Jesus leans on his cousin John's arms, and he rises from that river renewed. Philip reaches out to do the same for Nathanael. With love, Philip offers him another way, a way to step beyond his self-imposed limits, into the adventure of building the Beloved Community of Christ, and the unlimited love of Jesus.

We need community. We need fire: the fire of insight, the fire of awakening, the fire of renewal, the fire of righteousness that burns for justice. And we need water—water to wash away everything that weighs us down and limits us, water to clean our wounds, the water of grace to help us rise up again. John baptised with water. Jesus added the fire of the Holy Spirit, the fire that moves with us, challenging us to "come and see."

*--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison  
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A prayer from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the church:

Lord, we thank you for your church, founded upon your word,  
that challenges us to do more than sing and pray  
but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers  
depends on us and not upon you.

Help us realize that humanity was created  
to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity.

Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace,

Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together,  
and live together until that day when all God's children

Black, white, red, brown, and yellow,

will rejoice in one common band of humanity

in the reign of our Lord and of our God,

we pray. Amen.

--Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.