

Context

In our celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, we draw an excerpt from the Gospel of Luke (3:15-16, 21-22) which describes, in minimal terms, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

¹⁵ Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire..... ²¹ After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

This verses are part of a larger introduction by Luke for the public ministry of Jesus. Just as Luke did for the opening of the Gospel, he provides a historical context for Jesus' entry into his messianic mission:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (Luke 3:1-2)

He casts the call of John the Baptist in the form of an Old Testament prophetic call (Luke 3:2) and extends the quotation from Isaiah found in the other gospels by the addition of Isaiah 40:4-5. In doing so, he presents the theme of the universality of salvation, which he has announced earlier in the words of Simeon (Luke 2:30-32).

...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. He went throughout (the) whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Luke 3:2-6)

Moreover, in describing the expectation of the people (*Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah - Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah - Luke 3:15*), Luke is characterizing the time of John's preaching in the same way as he had earlier described the situation of other devout Israelites in the infancy narrative (Luke 2:25-26, 37-38). In Luke 3:7-18 Luke presents the preaching of John the Baptist who urges the crowds to reform in view of the coming wrath (Luke 3:7, 9: eschatological preaching), and who offers the crowds certain standards for reforming social conduct (Luke 3:10-14: ethical preaching), and who announces to the crowds the coming of one mightier than he (Luke 3:15-18: messianic preaching).

Commentary

¹⁵ Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire..... ²¹ After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

John contrasts his baptism with that of Jesus. The point is not that one baptism is with water, the other in the Holy Spirit and fire (the early church also baptized in water from the beginning), but that John's baptism is *only* in water, that is, a ritual sign expressing outwardly what the person must express inwardly. The baptism of Jesus will be definitive: it will be an act of God bringing salvation (Holy Spirit) and judgment (fire). The image of fire is expanded by reference to the process of separating wheat from chaff. A "winnowing fan" or shovel tosses the mixture into the air; the heavier kernels of wheat fall to the floor, while the chaff blows away for later burning (Isa 21:10).

Culpepper ("Luke", New Interpreter's Bible, 85-6) offers the following:

"What is the relationship between Spirit and fire in this saying? The following interpretations have been advanced: (1) fire describes the inflaming purifying work of the Spirit; (2) the repentant will receive the Spirit, while the unrepentant will experience the judgment of fire; (3) since the Greek term for "Spirit" can also mean "wind," the meaning is that Jesus' baptism will bring the judgment in a mighty wind and fire; (4) as might be implicit in the first option, "Spirit" or "wind" and "fire" reflect the Christian interpretation of the Pentecost experience; or (5) John saw in Spirit and fire the means of eschatological purification: the refiner's fire for the repentant and destruction for the unrepentant. The last combines elements of (2) and (3) and fits both the historical context of John's preaching and the literary context in which the saying about winnowing follows. Luke, of course, may have seen the fulfillment of this saying at Pentecost in ways John could not have imagined."

In v.18 we are told that John preached "good news." This is part of the Lucan transition to move from the ministry of John to that of Jesus. We can assume John preached about the soon-to-come arrival of the Messiah. Craddock (Luke, Interpretation Commentaries, 49) offers this wonderful summary: "When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news (v. 18). The primary aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff." John offers hope and new life for the tax collectors, the soldiers, and all sinners. We all can be gathered by Jesus into his kingdom.

"the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove"

Only Luke includes the phrase "in bodily form". Jensen (Preaching Luke's Gospel) makes the point that "Bodily descent has the character of permanence. The Spirit not only descended upon Jesus; the Spirit of God came in bodily form and it will remain upon Jesus." He makes a contrast between Jesus and Israel's "charismatic judges" on whom the Spirit of God descended temporarily.

The descent of the Spirit on Jesus can not be understood separately from Luke 4:18-19 where Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1-2

"The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the LORD and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn"

The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus was an anointing (and empowering) for his ministry on earth. At the same time, prior to this event at Nazareth, we are told: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (4:1-2a). At the end of the temptation, we are told, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee" (4:14a). Did Jesus' "power" for his ministry come just from the descent of the Holy Spirit or from his successful battle with the devil in the wilderness? The answer is probably "both". If we want to experience the power of the Spirit, it may mean that we have to do more than pray. We may have to enter into the battle with Satan -- evil forces wherever they may be in our communities or within us.

Craddock (Luke, *Interpretation Commentaries*, p.52) writes: “The coming of the Holy Spirit does not make Jesus the Son of God; Luke has told us who Jesus is from the time of the annunciation. The Holy Spirit comes to empower Jesus for his ministry. He will soon be led by the Spirit into the desert (4:1), and then he will return ‘in the power of the spirit into Galilee’ (4:14).” Both the temptation story and the Isaiah quote indicate that Jesus' Spirit-led ministry is to battle and defeat evil in whatever form it appears. And, that Spirit-led ministry continues after the ascension through “all flesh” upon whom God has now poured the Spirit.

A Voice From Heaven

The voice in Luke, as in Mark, speaks directly to Jesus. We overhear the words. In Matthew's account of the baptism and all three accounts of the transfiguration, the voice speaks to those around Jesus: “This is my son....”

What does it mean to be the “Son of God?” Luke provides answers to this in the larger context. The baptism in Luke is followed by a genealogy which ends with “son of God.” This is followed by the temptation story where the devil tries to help Jesus get a “better” understanding. Twice he states: “If you are the Son of God” (4:3, 9).

Next Jesus reads in Nazareth from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..” (*quoted above*) With these verses, we come to understand more clearly the meaning of the descending Spirit at Jesus' baptism. Being the Son of God means facing temptation and being servant to all in need. It is not a life of glory, but a life that will lead to the cross. Tannehill (*Luke*, p.85) suggests that the devil tries to tempt Jesus “with another understanding of his role as Son of God, for it could be understood as privilege rather than calling. Through struggle, Jesus must arrive at the right understanding of his position as Son of God”.

A proper understanding of Jesus' role is indicated by Luke's other use of the term “beloved” (*agapetos*) in 20:13. In this parable, the owner of a vineyard decides to send his beloved son to the tenants of the vineyard after they had mistreated the slaves he had sent to them. He says to himself, “I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.” They don't. They kill the beloved son, which is what will happen to Jesus.

Well-Pleased

I find it interesting that God is already “well pleased” (*eudokeo*) with Jesus. Jesus hasn't done anything yet within the narrative, except the incident in the temple when he was twelve (2:41-51). In fact, it is in the verse following God's indication of pleasure in Jesus, that we are told that Jesus begins his work. God's pleasure in him began before Jesus started his public ministry.

Is God “well pleased” with us because we do things that please God; or does God's positive attitude towards us because of who we are, before we have done anything pleasing or non-pleasing, motivate us to seek to do what is pleasing to God -- to live up to what God has already declared us to be?

Tannehill (*Luke*, p.85): “God is affirming a special relationship with Jesus and uses words that express the closest kind of familial and emotional bond. Jesus is “my Son,” he is “the Beloved,” and he is one with whom God is “well pleased” (an indication of God's special favor). With these words, God confirms a special relationship with Jesus and expresses confidence in him. But with the relationship goes responsibility, for the relationship implies obedience and the gift of the Spirit implies a mission. God's expressed confidence in Jesus binds God's cause to Jesus, who is now responsible for it. Jesus must respond to God's trust by doing God's will.”

I don't think that Luke tell us about Jesus' baptism just to inform us about what happened to Jesus. He relates this story also to indicate something about our baptisms, our need to be in prayer, our anointing with the Spirit, and our subsequent battles with evil and ministry in the world. We have a “beloved” and “well-pleasing” relationship with God. With that comes the responsibility to live out of that relationship –

to fulfill the mission God sends before us – to live up to the confidence God has placed on us. Jesus' baptism prefigures Pentecost. The era of Jesus' ministry prefigures the era of the Church's ministry, our ministry, in the world.

The Theology of History

It is interesting to note that Luke relates no encounter between Jesus and John. In fact, before we are told about Jesus' baptism, we are informed that John has been put in prison! A traditional way of understanding this order of events is that Luke (the rhetorical historian) divides history into three separate and distinct eras. The first is the time of the prophets, which includes John the Baptist. That era ends with the imprisonment of John. John will no longer be in the picture. After that, the time of Jesus begins with a statement in our text about: (1) the opening of the heaven, (2) the coming down of the Holy Spirit in a visible form (dove); and (3) heavenly speech. This era of Jesus ends with his ascension -- related only in Luke & Acts. Jesus will no longer be in the picture. After that, the time of the Holy Spirit (or the Church) begins with a statement in Acts 2:1-4 about (1) something coming "from heaven," (2) the coming down of the Holy Spirit in a visible form (tongues of fire), and (3) heavenly speech.

For Luke, the movement from an old era into a new one required a break from the old – John is put in prison – Jesus ascends into heaven. Yet, at the same time, there are common elements in all three periods, such as the fulfillment of promises/prophesies and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that we are living in the third era sometimes needs to be emphasized. There are those whose faith is so centered on the historical Jesus, that they can't live their lives in the new period under the power of the Holy Spirit. If all we do is talk about the historical Jesus, e.g., arguing about the virgin birth, the miracles, the physical resurrection – we may be making faith nothing more than believing historical events really happened, i.e., a history lesson. While such teachings are certainly part of our Christian confession of faith, for the early believers in the Book of Acts, faith was relying on the power of the Holy Spirit for life today. They recognized that Jesus had left this earth. In order for the ministry of Jesus to continue, it would have to be done by all the believers who had been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit – not by Jesus nor by particular Spirit-filled people, i.e., the prophets.

Notes

3:15 *the people were filled with expectation*: the word expectation (*prosdokía*) always carries a sense of either fear or hope

3:16 *He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire*: in contrast to John's baptism with water, Jesus is said to baptize with the holy Spirit and with fire. From the point of view of the early Christian community, the Spirit and fire must have been understood in the light of the fire symbolism of the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4); but as part of John's preaching, the Spirit and fire should be related to their purifying and refining characteristics (Ezekiel 36:25–27; Malachi 3:2–3).

21-22 *After all the people...I am well pleased*: These two verses are structured with primary and subordinate phrases. The primary phrases, by themselves, would form a sentence, literally translated, as follows: "It happened that the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down and a voice came out of heaven." The lines about Jesus' baptism and his praying are subordinate clauses (genitive absolutes in Greek). They are not the main point of the sentence. The aorist tense probably indicates that the baptism had happened sometime prior to the praying. The present tense indicates that Jesus was still praying when the main actions occurred: the opening, the coming down, and the heavenly speech.

21 *was praying*: An element of the baptismal account found only in Luke. Lacking the description of Jesus coming out of the water, Luke is describing a prayer experience similar to the transfiguration (9:28) Luke regularly presents Jesus at prayer at important points in his ministry: here at his baptism; at the choice of the Twelve (6:12); before Peter's confession (9:18); at the transfiguration (9:28); when he

teaches his disciples to pray (11:1); at the Last Supper (22:32); on the Mount of Olives (22:41); on the cross (23:46).

heaven was opened: Does Luke intend to imply anything more than a means for the “coming down of the Spirit” and so that the “voice from heaven” might be clearly heard. In one way, heaven was opened earlier in the writing when the “multitude of the heavenly hosts” appear and praise God and then return to heaven (2:13, 15). The next time “heaven” is used following our text is in 4:25, which is part of Jesus' sermon in the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus makes reference to the time of Elijah “when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land.” If the “shutting up of heaven” resulted in famine and all that goes along with that: hunger, sickness, death; could not the “opening of heaven” symbolize the coming of plenty, health, and life? The same word for “opening” (*anoigo*) is used in some variant readings of 4:17 (the better attested word is *anaptusso* = “unroll”), which takes place in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus opens the scroll and finds Isaiah 61:1-2. Possibly Luke intends that both the opening of heaven and the opening of the scroll allows God to make a declaration about Jesus.

22 holy Spirit descended: For Luke this is the same Spirit already at work in the gospel (*cf.* 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25, 26). The implications of the anointing of the Spirit for Luke's understanding of messiahship unfolds in the narrative of Luke 4:18 and following.

you are my beloved Son: As does Mark, Luke tells us of a direct address to Jesus – which given it was during Jesus' prayer, we have the possibility that the voice was for Jesus alone and part of the prayer experience. The word “beloved” (*agapētos*) bears the nuance of “only son” as the LXX used it to translate the Hebrew *yahid* which means “only son.”

son: This episode in Luke focuses on the heavenly message identifying Jesus as Son and, through the allusion to Isaiah 42:1, as Servant of Yahweh. The relationship of Jesus to the Father has already been announced in the infancy narrative (Luke 1:32,35; 2:49); it occurs here at the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry and will reappear in Luke 9:35 before another major section of Luke's gospel, the travel narrative (Luke 9:51–19:27). Elsewhere in Luke's writings (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38), this incident will be interpreted as a type of anointing of Jesus.

well pleased: *eudekeo*. God is affirming a special relationship with Jesus and uses words that express the closest kind of familial and emotional bond. Jesus is “my Son,” he is “the Beloved,” and he is one with whom God is “well pleased” (an indication of God's special favor). With these words, God confirms a special relationship with Jesus and expresses confidence in him. But with the relationship goes responsibility, for the relationship implies obedience and the gift of the Spirit implies a mission. God's expressed confidence in Jesus binds God's cause to Jesus, who is now responsible for it. Jesus must respond to God's trust by doing God's will.