



## The Word...

The people were filled with expectation,  
and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ.  
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."  
*(Lk 3:15-16)*

## Pondering the Word ...

"Baptism by fire." This expression describes what happens when someone is thrown into a situation with no time to prepare, without a grace or "honeymoon" period. One has to learn the ropes and deal with issues and challenges right away.

We read about John baptizing with water, a common practice in Judaism. It was used to signify a cleansing of the soul, although the ritual was normally held in more formal settings. John quiets the anticipation of the crowd, explaining that the Christ is coming after him and will baptize them in a much more dramatic way.

We may think John is foretelling the Pentecost and being on fire with the Spirit, but I think his "baptism by fire" is more of a warning: the cold waters of the Jordon may be invigorating and cleansing and that is all well and good. But be vigilant. God's refining fire will appear and no mere ritual will make a difference if our hearts are not prepared to take the heat.

*"And the lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple; The messenger of the covenant whom you seek is coming! But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire..."*

(Mal 3: 1-2)

## Living the Word...

I guess we could say that's what happened almost two years ago when the first stirrings of the pandemic were heard and seen. Did we foresee such a baptism by fire? Yet I wonder if we have learned any lessons from our ordeal, if we will be better prepared when the next pandemic, the next natural disaster, the next hardship occurs. Because it will. We tend to go along, immersed in rituals of our lives, and then something ignites. We suddenly find ourselves up against an overwhelming challenge or loss.

While we can never prepare for all life has in store, and we surely don't want to live in a state of high alert, we can bolster our "heat shields" through daily prayer and acceptance that we are not in control. God gives us great knowledge and resources to mitigate the impact of realities of nature, but it is our faith and hope that helps us endure and grow. By opening up, the fires of life—big and small—can transform us into torch bearers of the Spirit's fire.

## Personal Reflections and Ideas ... \_\_\_\_\_

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**Mon, Jan 10:** *So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him. (Mk 1:14-20)*  
My children have returned to their respective homes, hundreds of miles away. We enjoyed a great Christmas but they both need to follow the call God has for them. I put myself in Zebedee's sandals as he watches his two sons go off, leaving him behind. I imagine, like any parent, he is proud, anxious, and a little sad.

**Reflection/Provision:** *Recall a time when you let go of someone or something: a child following their call, a loved one God has called home, a dream no longer possible. Share your feelings honestly with God. Turn any sorrows or bitterness you hold over to God. Start with something small and build from there.*

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**Tue, Jan 11:** *Eli watched her mouth, for Hannah was praying silently; her lips were moving, her voice could not be heard. Eli, thinking her drunk, said "How long will you make a drunken show of yourself?" (1 Sm 1:9-20)*

Hannah is praying in her own words, not in the prescribed or "proper" way, so Eli assumes the worst. But Hannah does not cower at the priest's scolding. She justifies herself and her prayer. Give Eli credit for rectifying his erroneous assumption by blessing her. Hannah leaves the temple confident she has made her request in good faith. She turns her prayer over to God's will. **Reflection/Provision:** *Have you ever judged another's style of prayer, assuming they are not sufficiently pious? We know Hannah's petition was granted. How do you feel when your petitions seem to go unanswered? If you find yourself judging others, whisper a prayer God will bless them! If your own prayer does not result in what you want, ask God to bless you so that you can know God's will.*

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**Wed, Jan 12:** *...young Samuel was minister to the LORD under Eli; revelation of the LORD was uncommon and vision infrequent. Eli was asleep in his usual place. ...The lamp of God was not yet extinguished... (1 Sm 3:1-10, 19-20)*

Things are not going well for Eli. The Lord has let him know his lineage will be cut off. It's been a dry period for Israel. The Lord has been painfully silent. We hear the lamp of God is not yet extinguished. That may indicate this scene occurs just before dawn, but Jewish scholar Robert Alter suggests we not overlook the symbolic meaning: even though things are dark and bleak, God's light still burns. **Reflection/Provision:** *There's a saying that the darkest hour is just before dawn; another, that the lowest ebb is the turn of the tide. If you are enduring a dark period, look for the light—it is there. Lean into that light. Remember, God's light is often borne by others. Like Samuel, we may be unfamiliar with God's voice. Make sure to listen closely to the light bearers in your life.*

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**Thu, Jan 13:** *"Why has the LORD permitted us to be defeated today by the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the Lord from Shiloh that it may go into battle among us and save us from the grasp of our enemies." (1 Sm 4:1-11)*

Sharing more of Robert Alter's commentary: *"...the elders arrogate to themselves a sacred object for their own purposes, conceiving the Ark magically...as a vehicle for power that they can manipulate for military ends." (from The Hebrew Bible, A Translation with Commentary, V.II, p. 190, 2019)* This has got to make one think about how often nations use religious symbols as a banner under which to commit atrocities such as genocides or the heinous act of burning crosses. **Reflection/Provision:** *This is not about praying with sacred items or in sacred places; it is about using God for our own purposes. Think about the things you pray for. Consider incorporating the phrase "thy will be done" after any prayers of intention you offer. Praying for evil or hardship to befall another is never prayer to God!*

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**Fri, Jan 14:** *Samuel delivered the message to those asking for a king: "He will take your sons and assign them to his chariots and horses...He will take the best of your fields... tithing your crops..." (1 Sm 8:4-7, 10-22a)*

"Be careful what you ask for -- you just might get it." Israel wants a human king to do for them all the things human kings do: defend their property, prepare them for war, lead them into battle. **Reflection/Provision:** *The analogy to the nationalist movements around the world is striking, as is the amount of money spent on national defense. Do you believe this is what God wants for us? Be careful what you ask for, what you vote for, what you think you really want. It may come with moral costs too difficult to bear.*

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**Sat, Jan 15:** *Jesus went out along the sea. All the crowd came to him and he taught them. As he passed by, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the customs post. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." (Mk 2:13-17)*

I wonder what Jesus was teaching the crowd that day. Perhaps something like: *"Every saint has a past. Every sinner has a future."* (Oscar Wilde) **Reflection/Provision:** *Jesus call Levi right where he is, in the midst of committing the sin of usury. We may think we need to clean up our act before Jesus will even venture near us. Not so! Jesus is present to us always and readily available when we need him the most. He calls to you. Get up and follow.*