

Bible Study Guide: Week of 1-3-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; 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 fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

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This first paragraph of our reading this week should be familiar, as it appeared as part of one of our gospel readings during Advent. This is the end of John the Baptist’s “Brood of Vipers” speech in which he urged the people to repent. Because of the charisma and content of John’s preaching the people began to wonder if he might be the Messiah. John seems to perceive that the people were all wondering about this and he preempts them by making it clear that another one is to come after him who will claim this role of Messiah. John contrasts his baptism “with water” with a greater baptism to come—one “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” This foreshadows the story of Pentecost from Acts 2 in which the Spirit descends on the early church in the form of flaming tongues, but it also anticipates the fire-like aspects of Jesus’ ministry. Fire can be used to cleanse and purify, to destroy, to give light and warmth, and to renew. In this way, John makes it clear that his baptism is neither exactly like earlier baptisms or ritual washings, nor is it exactly like later Christian baptism which the early church would practice and which we know today. Rather, John’s baptism was a specific act to prepare the people to see and accept Jesus when he came.

The image of threshing wheat is interesting. The process involved lifting up harvested plants with a winnowing fork or pitch fork and throwing the stalks into the air on a windy day. The wind blowing through the material would blow the light chaff away to one side where it could be disposed of. At the same time, the heavier grain would fall to the ground ready to be collected and stored. This image, like John’s prediction of a baptism “with the Holy Spirit and fire,” involves both wind and fire. The work of Jesus is, apparently, not just the separation of the good from the bad, but also the gathering and preservation of the good and the destruction of the bad. This could be good versus bad people, but it could also refer to the good and bad parts of each individual person. Jesus’ work is to gather what God intends to redeem and save, while doing away with that which is destined for destruction.

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Jesus’ baptism by John is almost incidental to this story. Luke doesn’t even tell us directly that John baptized Jesus. He uses the passive phrase “when Jesus had been baptized.” Luke also is the only gospel writer who mentions that Jesus was praying after his baptism. Unlike many early writers and Christians, Luke seems unconcerned that John baptized Jesus. This story often scandalized early Christians since Jesus is said to be without sin and John’s baptism was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus takes on John’s baptism in part to show his obedience to God, in part to validate and exalt John’s ministry, and in part as an

example to us, that we may do likewise. Luke's focus isn't on any of this, however. Instead, Luke spends more words and energy focusing on the aftermath of Jesus' baptism. It is God's action that is most important here, not John's. God the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus as a literal dove and God the Father speaks from heaven, "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well-pleased." In Matthew's version of this story, the voice says, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased." Subtly, Luke's wording puts the focus more on Jesus' own awareness of his identity and on God's act of affirmation and approval rather than on the crowds' awareness of Jesus' identity as Matthew focuses on.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Why do you think Jesus submitted to John's baptism even though John acknowledged that Jesus was more important and more powerful than John?**
- 2. What do you think John means that Jesus will "clear his threshing floor, gather the wheat, and burn the chaff?"**
- 3. Do you think it makes a difference for the voice to say "This is my Son" vs. "You are my son?" What difference does it make?**