

Water and fire (Psalm 29; Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)

John the Baptist's world and ours

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January 11, 2019

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Remember the last time you used a winnowing fork? The way the sunlight glinted off the metal prongs as the kernels of grain flew into the air and the chaff blew away across a clear blue sky?

And can't you see, in your mind's eye, a young wild ox skipping through the forests of Sirion?

Many images in the Bible, while no doubt vivid and effective for ancient audiences, are foreign to us today. The politics and geography of the world have shifted dramatically since the times of the ancient Hebrews and the earliest church. Farming practices have certainly changed. At times, reading the Bible can feel like entering a very unfamiliar world that requires historical research to navigate.

I don't remember the last time I winnowed wheat or watched an ox skip. But I do remember the flickering of the Advent candle flames, the crackle of fall campfires, my friend in California calling from his car as he fled wildfires. I know how the rain sounds on my roof and how water feels on my skin and how high the flood waters rose in town before the levy was built.

When the psalmist writes that "the voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire," I understand the power being invoked. I know that those flashes of fire can entrance and warm and scorch. I understand this reality not because I've read an essay on "The Effects of Fire in Ancient Israel," but because I've seen and felt fire, just like the

psalmist.

When I read in Isaiah that “the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you,” I am transported back to a college rafting trip. I have fallen into the rapids and am hanging on to a rock, five feet from a waterfall, waiting and praying for someone to throw me a rope. Rivers have not become calmer and gentler since Isaiah’s time.

The power of fire and water is timeless and universal. And it is to these archetypal images that John the Baptist connects baptism, allowing baptism to become a ritual and a reality that maintains its meaning across the millennia.

“I baptize you,” says John, “with water.” Water for cleansing body and soul. Water that gives life to all of creation. Water that we take into our bodies and that we put our bodies into. While our post-Resurrection baptism is certainly theologically distinct from the baptism John offered, the physical, emotional, and symbolic weight of the water remains unchanged.

“He will baptize you,” says John, “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Fire for purifying. Fire for heating. Fire that can make the difference between life and death—either way. Even as the concrete meaning of “baptism by fire” remains somewhat elusive, the implicit meaning carries over from John’s time to today. Because we know fire. So while we may not understand exactly what “baptism by fire” is, we know it is both comforting and spectacular. We know that once it happens, nothing will be the same.

When reading ancient texts about foreign lands, these images of fire and water make the landscape more familiar. These points where we can connect most fully with the world of the writers make our reading, by turns, both more comforting and more disturbing.