

Divergence on the Lectionary, First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

First Reading

Isaiah 43:1–7

But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
    he who formed you, O Israel:  
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
    I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
    and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
    and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the LORD your God,  
    the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
    Cush and Seba in exchange for you.  
Because you are precious in my eyes,  
    and honored, and I love you,  
I give men in return for you,  
    peoples in exchange for your life.  
Fear not, for I am with you;  
    I will bring your offspring from the east,  
    and from the west I will gather you.  
I will say to the north, Give up,  
    and to the south, Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from afar  
    and my daughters from the end of the earth,  
everyone who is called by my name,  
    whom I created for my glory,  
    whom I formed and made.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Acts 8:14–17

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might

receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (Omitted verses in italics)

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

*(So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.)*

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (ESV)

Questions and comments for discussion

First Reading

This week's text from Isaiah comes from that middle section known by scholars as "Second Isaiah." Most scholars will tell you that these prophecies of hope and restoration were written by a "school of prophets" who traced their lineage back to Isaiah, but were given by this school during the time of the Babylonian exile. While I don't object to that reading too strongly, I don't accept it either. I think that it comes from a way of reading that lacks any real understanding of the Holy Spirit and what can be done under the Spirit's empowerment. So I have chosen to accept that Isaiah did foresee the captivity in some form, and that he was given these prophecies long before they were needed. But if you prefer the scholarly approach we're not really all that far apart.

Because this passage and others like it speak of the heart of God towards God's people, and whether it came from Isaiah or a school he founded, it can only have come through inspiration. There is something in it to me that sets my heart on fire. It touches truths in me that mere empty platitudes never could.

I have written in other Divergences that I think Scripture does revelation on two levels, first it reveals God to us, and secondly it reveals us to ourselves when it shows us how we distort God to serve our own ends. This is the first way, in a very stark kind of revelation. You can hear the passion in God's voice as God declares our value to Them, and know yourself to be far more precious than you'd ever understood. It is this same passion that we hear at Jesus' baptism in the Gospel for today. And it is important to recognize that this same Voice says this same Thing over you and me as it does over Jesus.

That's what happens when Holy Spirit gets involved. We hear that voice, speaking, singing over us, not just Jesus or some "holier" person. And it this vision of God's, this realization of how beautiful we are in His eyes that \*inspires\* us to do differently, to do better, to have greater compassion and courage. It doesn't demand, it in-spire(spirit)s us.

When we consider these words and their power in the context for which they were given, the Babylonian captivity, I think they take on new meaning. The inspiration that lies beneath and within them speaks into being a kind of hope that we cannot summon on our own. We are able to confront circumstances far beyond our scope with a confidence that allows us to love even our enemies as we overcome the obstacles they throw up for us.

Not a bad image for me this week.

## Second Reading

Okay, so I'm going to venture into some dangerous waters here. I think that in both this reading and in the Gospel text we see Luke making clear that for him, there are two kinds of baptism. Baptism in the Name of Jesus and baptism of the Holy Spirit. As we work our way through Luke-Acts this year, we'll see more evidence of this.

This isn't a popular teaching among Episcopalians (or any main line Christians that I know of), but I can't seem to avoid it. In the early church there were baptisms that did not include the infilling of the Holy Spirit. While this understanding of mine does not invalidate the "one baptism" we preach, or its validity, it does suggest that "there is more" to be had. The "one baptism" that we say we believe in seems to be to be that

which is a sign of one's chosenness by God. Some would say "salvation," but I don't believe that baptism saves, God does. This doesn't exclude the possibility that there is another baptism that empowers us further, something worth desiring. Certainly the Church in Jerusalem thought that this was something the believers in Samaria ought to have.

Some will argue, I think, that when I anoint a baby or other baptizand with oil after the water and say, "you are sealed by the Holy Spirit" that we have accomplished both, and perhaps we have, but I will only offer this. I measure the effectiveness of that Spirit baptism by its results in the life of believers. What I know from my own experience is this. When one is touched by the Holy Spirit in this second baptism it sets a fire burning that will not be put out. I look for that fire. I have written before about the two turning points for the disciples after Jesus' resurrection. On that first Sunday Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In spite of this, we still find them huddled together in prayer on the Day of Pentecost. Something else happened, then. The Spirit they'd been given fifty days earlier is somehow activated, and they become the powerful evangelists they were called by Jesus to be. Call it what you will, this passage of Acts calls it another baptism.

It's too much to get into here, but I wanted to introduce this understanding of mine here so that we can continue the conversation about it throughout Year C, because you just can't get away from it in Luke and Acts.

### Gospel Text

I have noted in other Divergences the tensions that seem to exist between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus. Each of the evangelists does different things to deal with this tension and lift up Jesus as the more important one of the pair. It feels important to me that in Luke, whose Gospel I suggest has the goal of healing rifts between Jewish and Gentile believers, John is not even visible at the moment of Jesus' baptism. We assume that it was John who did it, but there is none of the awkwardness that Matthew makes visible when John says, "I ought to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Luke will deal with the obvious differences between Jesus and John, between their teachings, in other ways as the Gospel proceeds, but in this inaugural moment, John is absent.

It is also worth noting that in Luke, the Spirit does not descend on Jesus at the moment of His baptism, but later, while He prays. I think this speaks again to Luke's conviction that there are two moments of baptism as I mentioned above. I wrote above about the way that the Voice of God empowers us to do ministry in a way that we could not have done before. I personally believe that it was this encounter that empowered Jesus to do

what He did the rest of His life (just as Pentecost empowered the disciples). Both the voice and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit were necessary, as Jesus had (according to Phillipians) emptied Himself when He became human, and relied no less on Holy Spirit to do what He did than you and I would have to rely.