

“Gator in the Swamp, Fire in the Font!”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Scott Huie

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Today is “Baptism of Our Lord” Sunday as we commemorate Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River. While I think we today can consider it the first official Christian baptism, it was not your everyday baptism, and neither was this one from a nearby church as captured by home video (*America’s Funniest Videos*).

(Show video of child doing a cannon ball into the baptismal font prior to his baptism, getting the minister totally soaked and bringing much comic relief to the congregation.)

Yes, not everything that happens goes according to the plan. That was adorable and funny and cute. And that boy probably got a whuppin’ when he got home. But as our theme for the day—let me get right to it—***baptism is not some cute ritual we do in church, but rather an initiation into the family of God and an invitation to the dangerous life of a disciple who carries the fire of God’s Spirit.*** Let me repeat that: baptism is not some cute ritual we do in church, but rather an initiation into the family of God and an invitation to the dangerous life of a disciple who carries the fire of God’s Spirit. Let us listen now with new ears for that fire as we read of this first baptism as recorded by the gospel writer Luke.

(Read scripture.)

A few weeks ago, we Huies visited my brother and his family, who live on the eastern, Atlantic shore of Florida. A couple of days earlier, he had invited us to experience something new. He invited us to go jet skiing on the windy St. John’s River. Well we Snellville Huies don’t jet ski every day, and we like new things, so we said, “Yes.”

Upon arrival, however, we learned that the St. John’s River happens to be a popular habitat for Florida alligators. Suddenly, we became not so sure that this should be on our To-Do list. But my brother said, “You swim in the ocean, don’t you? There are sharks there, right?” Good point. “Well, like sharks, gators are as afraid of you as you are of them.” Another good point. And then my nephew said, “Uncle Scott, did you know that more people are killed by coconuts falling on their heads from palm trees than there are people killed by alligators?” Another good point, though I am not all that convinced how authentic that research is. But we were sold on the idea.

So off we went to the St. John's River. We put in the water on our sleek Yamaha Wave Runner jet skis and sped off for a trip of great fun. With Karla and I on one jet ski and Jackson and Madison on the other with their uncle David behind their wheel, we were having the time of our life, weaving in and out and feeling the cool Florida breeze on our faces. (*Show pictures.*) It wasn't long before our first gator-sighting. Only it didn't look like a gator. It looked like a log in the water. But the "log" moved and the "log" disappeared. Then we saw another "log" and then another until finally we realized that this was a little more menacing than Tim Tebow with a football in his "swamp."

We continued on our journey around 10 miles up the river before we saw it, the first gator fully out of the water sunbathing. It was a big gator. So we slowed our jet skis down and approached (*show picture*). Karla and I were around 20 feet back from my brother and Madison and Jackson as they got out the camera. They approached to around 20 feet away. At first, the gator was still, frozen like a statue, but then, suddenly as if stung by a bee, it wiggled its body and launched into the water full speed ahead toward us, as if it were very hungry and we were ginormous hot dogs. Not to panic, we were on safe boatcraft. However, my brother made such a sharp and sudden turn that the boat flipped over sending Madison and Jackson and my brother into the water.

Jackson suddenly morphed into Michael Phelps and swam as he has never swum before heading toward our jet ski. Karla shouted out, "Stay with the boat." Jackson frantically said something that can't be repeated in church, but could be translated as, "Mother, I respect your authority, but I think it is in my best interest to swim in the opposite direction from that hungry gator." We pulled Jackson out of the water to safety. His body was shaking.

Meanwhile, brother David and Madison quickly worked in tandem and flipped their jet ski right side up and then with cool, methodical precision, pulled themselves up—who knows—perhaps in the nick of time. There was no telling where that gator was. We just knew it had to be just a few feet away.

We all sighed relief, felt a renewed sense of gratitude to be alive, and we continued the journey with a new lease on life as well as with a story to tell. Anybody wanna go jet skiing with the Huies on the St. John's River?

We'll never forget that experience. And the more I think about it, as I look back, I see that experience as a little like baptism. No, not baptism the way it is commonly perceived, as a cute, sweet ritual, but rather baptism as described by Luke done by John the Baptist to Jesus in the Jordan River, something that stirs up,

something that enlivens and gives a new lease on life, something perhaps even a bit dangerous.

Folks were coming to John wondering if he might be the long-awaited Messiah. After all, John was a powerful preacher, not your everyday temple priest. In fact, he was sort of a freak of society, dressed in camel hair and eating wild locust. He was a man on a mission, having that looking in his eyes that bore the authority of prophesy. He had gained a reputation of stirring the masses up, telling people to repent and to share and warning them about God's coming judgment.

John, however, had no "messiah complex." He responded to people's inquiries loud and clear, saying, "No, I'm not he. For I just baptize with water. The one who is coming—why I ain't even worthy to fiddle with his shoelaces. He is the one who will judge and will divide the wheat from the chaff, and he's coming to baptize you not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

That's a picture you don't always get with baptisms today. Water yes, but fire? Usually not. The water represents our initiation as God's people, our being adopted into the family of faith. The water symbolizes our cleansing on the inside, just as bath water cleanses us on the outside. We celebrate our claim that this water is transformed from an ordinary everyday use into a sacred use, such that we have the audacity to make a rather outrageous claim: that the one who is being baptized now has a special relationship with God and God's people—that they—we—are family now. Yes, we are all related by faith by God's covenantal promises as brothers and sisters in Christ. That is what the waters of baptism mean to us.

But there is more to complete this picture. From this story from Luke, we see that baptism is no dainty thing. In fact, it is rather dangerous, for Jesus comes to baptize with fire. Fire is a symbol for the Holy Spirit. Baptism by fire foreshadows for Luke what is to come at Pentecost, the fire of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, which changed the world forever.

It is hard to live without fire. We need fire both for warmth and for cooking our food and for energy. To a large extent we've controlled it. But fire still has the ability to flare up unexpectedly and cause absolute havoc, and a fire which is out of control is terrifying. People die needlessly every year through tragic fires caused by carelessness or electrical malfunctions. Fire seems to be one of those elements which is essential and is wonderful in moderation, but is also potentially dangerous. So it's interesting that both the worst that can happen to human beings—hell—and the best that can happen to human beings—the Holy Spirit—have historically been described in terms of fire. I appreciate very much the

official Methodist logo, which has a cross, and next to it is a burning flame. My friends, there is water in the font, yes. But there is also fire!

What does that mean for us today, that Jesus baptizes with fire—that there is fire in this font? I think we get a glimpse of just what those words meant, as Luke goes on to tell us in the next chapter that Jesus went from his baptism to the wilderness to stand up against the seductive powers of evil. I wonder if that is where we get the saying, fight fire with fire. Jesus stood up to the “fire” of the devil with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

I would suggest that what that means is that as disciples of this Jesus, we too are to fight fire with fire. We too are to resist evil. We too are to invite the Holy Spirit in not just to give us warm spiritual fuzzies that make us feel good, but to equip us for authentic and yes, even dangerous, discipleship that stands up to the forces of darkness in this world. My friends, there is fire in this font.

Perhaps you think it a bit odd—maybe it does sound a little out of place—that at every baptism we ask the one being baptized—or if it is an infant, we ask the parents of the one being baptized—“Do you renounce evil and its power in the world?” But that question is fundamental to our understanding of what baptism and discipleship are really about. We renounce evil. We declare our allegiance. We mark a line in the sand. It is more than just words. It is more than just belief even. It’s faith put into action.

So often the message in our world today is “I’m OK, and you’re OK, and the world’s OK,” and the church, it seems, has unfortunately often embraced such thinking. I recently heard, however, that the most prophetic task of the contemporary church is to admit that we and the world we live in are not OK. Because the church is about the only place left in modern society where even the potential exists to hear the truth that something is the matter—not that we can plunge ourselves into a sea of guilt, but so that we can accept the help and redemption that comes from God.

There is fire in this font, my friends. “Do you renounce evil and its power in the world?” That is like a splash of cold water in the face to many of us, and so is the follow-up question that we usually ask, “Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from God?” Such questions, however, are important because they remind us that before we can turn to and embrace God, we must first turn away from all that would throw itself in the way of God. Baptism is not just turning toward something or someone; it perhaps begins with the act of turning from.

There is no question that as we ponder the world in which we live, there is so much that a disciple is to turn from—a world where some corporate presidents make 500 times the salary of some of the employees; a world where foreclosures and homelessness are so much more of a problem today than barely a year ago; a world where drugs ravage the inner city and suburbs alike; a world where celebrity is worshipped and the poor are ignored; a world where children give birth to children that will be raised by someone else. It's a messed-up world, and we are called to turn from that which is not of God.

In this sacrament through the water, we are initiated, adopted, welcomed into God's family, but here we are also baptized with the fire of God's Spirit to enter into the dangerous waters of our world to resist evil and declare our allegiance. Friends, there are gators in the world's swamp, but there is fire in this font!

There is the story of a Kiawah Indian actually named Scott, who wrote about his childhood. He wrote that early one morning, when he was a boy, his father woke him up and said, "Son, it's time to go."

Scott writes, "He took me, sleepily, to an old woman's house, an old squaw, and left me there. And all day long, she taught me. She taught me the story of the Kiawah. She taught me the songs and the chants; she told me the story of the Kiawah, up near the Yellowstone; coming into Nebraska, Iowa, into Kansas and Oklahoma; the blizzards, the hunts, the fighting, the coming of the white man; finally the reservation. All day long she said that; all day long, she sang that. At sundown, my father came and said, 'Son, it's time to go.'"

He said, "I left her house a Kiawah."

Friends, as we consider the meaning of baptism, it is my hope and prayer that we keep in mind what's most important—not that this sacrament is cute and sweet, not that this sacrament usually makes our service go over an hour. The most important thing is the fire in this font of water that enables men and women, boys and girls from one generation to the next, say, "I left this place a Christian. And because I am baptized, that makes all the difference in how I live my life." Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of all glory, who gave us the gift of Jesus and empowered him by the fire of your Spirit at the Jordan River, you have called us by our own name too and led us through perilous waters. Lead us now by your Holy Spirit to show your love to those we meet at work, at school, at home, and in places of recreation. Let your presence be known through us to the sick and sorrowing, to the hungry and those in prison, to the victims of violence and disaster. Surround all families here with your love and encourage them with your Spirit that, like your Son, our children may grow in wisdom and in years and in favor with you and all humankind. Give us grace to know the names of children in need, to accept with your Son our ministry to love the world. May we risk faith for the love of you and your good news. Strengthen us in the promises made at our baptism, for we remember with joy and grateful praise your gift of new life through Jesus Christ, your beloved Son.

Amen.