

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

## FIRES AND FLOODS

Luke 12:49-51; Proper 15C-Pentecost 10C; August 17-18, 2025

I can't remember a time when there was so much smoke in the air. Forest fires in Canada have been burning for years, and every time the wind blows from that direction we are blanketed with smoke. Devastating forest fires in the western US are also burning out of control. A few years ago, Deb and I visited the north rim of the Grand Canyon with its hundred-year-old lodge nestled among the tall trees. The lodge and those trees are now destroyed by fire, a fire which is still burning out of control. While fire can be a wonderful tool for good, when it is out of control it is devastating and deadly.

The same can be said for water, something we need to stay alive. When there is too much water, the devastation from flooding can be even worse than from fire. Think of the recent flood in the hill country of Texas that swept away those campers who tragically drowned and died. The hurricane in North Carolina a couple of years ago left devastation from floods that they are still trying to recover from. Even around here, too much rainwater has caused fields to flood and crops to be drowned out. Water is good and necessary for life, but when it comes in floods, it is deadly.

Jesus taught His disciples that He came to bring fires and floods on this earth. **“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be [flooded] with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you.”**

Jesus' reference to the destructive power of fire is straightforward and reminiscent of the fire from heaven that destroyed sinful Sodom and Gomorrah. I have taken a little liberty in translating Jesus' second reference to “baptism” as “flood.” The Greek word *baptizein* (βαπτίζειν), “to baptize,” refers to any washing with water by pouring, sprinkling, dipping, submerging, and even drowning in a flood. The **“baptism to be baptized/flooded with”** that Jesus said He had to undergo distressed Him until it was accomplished, it was finished.

What are these fires and floods Jesus referred to?

These fires and floods are related to each other. They refer to something that would happen to Jesus first and then apply to everyone in the world. A devastating and destructive fire and flood would come upon Jesus first but then would also burn up creation and engulf the world like the great Flood of Noah's day. (But didn't God promise that He wouldn't destroy the world again by a flood that covered the whole earth? Yes, yet the flood Jesus describes encompasses all people on earth.) What are these fires and floods?

God's fire of judgment on the world's sin was cast first on Jesus on the cross. God's fire of judgment will also consume this fallen creation on the Last Day. St. Peter's Second Epistle describes this: **The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed** (3:10). Peter reminds us that this has not happened already because God is being patient with sinners, giving us time to repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, but that day of fire is surely coming, and we better be ready for it.

Suffering God's eternal fire on the Last Day is avoidable for us because God first kindled His fire against Jesus. Jesus' life was "burnt up" in the fires of His suffering and death on the cross for us and for our salvation. Jesus was roasted like a Lamb in the fires of Passover. Jesus suffered the fire of God's wrath against sin and unbelief on the cross, where all sin and death were burnt up completely. We know Jesus accomplished this because of His resurrection from the dead. The "fire" of the cross, though it engulfed Jesus and caused His death because of our sins, resulted in life for us since He rose from the dead.

When Deb and I were vacationing in the Canadian Rockies this summer, we saw places where there had been devastating forest fires. Some were recent, and the ground was still scorched, but where there had been forest fires a while ago there was now green, new life growing. We learned that the cones of lodgepole pines only release seeds when the temperature rises above 115 degrees, which doesn't happen naturally in that cooler northern climate. Forest fires, though they destroy the old forest of trees, release the seeds for new growth and life. God's creation is amazing.

The tree of the cross burnt Jesus to the ground but that released seed planted in us that sprouts to life and grows. Our sin and death were destroyed in that fire, and we are given new life by faith in Jesus. Now is the time to repent of our sins and receive God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus. And when the destructive fire finally comes on this fallen creation at the end of the age, we will live forever in **“the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells”** (2 Pt 3:3).

The flood waters of baptism have both a destructive and creative force. The baptism Jesus had to undergo refers again to His suffering and death on the cross and then His resurrection from the dead. What did Jesus' baptism accomplish for us? Like the world-wide flood of Noah's day, the flood of water and blood that flowed out of Jesus' side on the cross covers the sins of the whole world. Sin and death were drowned and died with Jesus on the cross.

This flood is applied to us when we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection—like Caralynn Joy will be Sunday/today. Luther's “Flood Prayer” in the Baptism liturgy gives many examples of how God used flood waters both to destroy and to save. Everyone not on the ark drowned and died; those in the ark were saved. Hint: you want to be in the ark of the Church by faith in Jesus to be saved. Pharaoh and his host of charioteers were drowned and died in the Red Sea, but Israel passed through the flood water to go on to the Promised Land. Jesus drowned in our sin and death in the Jordan River when He was baptized, and thereby God “sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and lavish washing away of sin” (LSB 269).

Because of the flood that washed over Jesus, we are washed clean of our sins and receive the Holy Spirit **“whom [God] poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life”** (Tit 3). Living in this baptismal grace, “the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition (us recognizing our sins with sorrow) and repentance (turning away from sin in faith) be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, [so] that a new man [can] daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

Jesus came to bring fires and floods, both to destroy and kill and to bring new life and save. Thanks be to God! Amen.