

January 9, Baptism C (Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)

When we resist the powers that oppress this world, we are baptized through fire.

by [Ismael Ruiz-Millán](#) in the [December 29, 2021](#) issue

John's baptism with water is a bold exhortation for people to repent publicly and join a covenantal community with a particular way of life. For John, leading people to repentance is crucial because he is preparing the way to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. That is why he is assertive, even aggressive—and his tone does not stop the crowds from following him and responding to his extravagant and passionate ways.

John understands the urgency of his mission, and he also understands his place in God's redeeming plan. Therefore, when the people question whether he is the Messiah, right away he makes it clear that he is not. Why do they want to know this? What are they expecting? What are they searching for? Perhaps, amid the oppression and marginalization that the Israelites are experiencing, they just hunger for a sense of belonging.

John is offering this to them—a particular community and way of life. John's audience is expecting a Messiah, but what they do not know yet is that they are becoming the messianic community—the body of Christ on earth. John knows well that the one coming after him is more powerful. Not only that, but this powerful one is coming to gather the wheat and burn the chaff.

John offers an image that for many today can be interpreted as judgmental. He tells this expectant crowd that for them to fully belong to this community, they need to wait for the powerful one coming after him and be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. What does this mean? How do we know that we are baptized with the Holy Spirit? How do we know that we are baptized with fire? How do we know if we are wheat or chaff? The church has wrestled with these questions, but we still don't have a straightforward answer.

While John's baptism is about repentance and cleansing from sins—which is why he does not want to baptize Jesus—Jesus undergoes baptism “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Jesus' baptism is accomplishing something specific: the beginning of a messianic community.

Notice that as Jesus is coming out of the baptismal waters, he is sealed and affirmed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants to do the same with John's expectant crowd. He wants to seal and affirm the beginning of this messianic community with the assurance of the same spirit that affirmed him—the Holy Spirit. Jesus continues doing that today. Jesus wants to seal and affirm people who want to join the messianic community. He wants all people to have a strong sense of belonging to the messianic community he came to establish.

In my faith journey, I have been exposed to the Catholic, Pentecostal, and Wesleyan traditions, both in Mexico and in the United States. Each of these traditions has a different understanding and practice of baptism, and each has a particular approach to the movement of the Holy Spirit and what it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. My exposure to these different approaches has enriched my journey and the way I experience the Holy Spirit in my own life.

As I think about each of these exposures, I realize that I have been in a search for belonging. So has my family of origin, leading them to baptize me in the Catholic Church as an infant. As I grew up, my search for belonging led me to make my First Communion in the Catholic Church when I was 11 years old. It led me to get baptized as an adult in the Pentecostal church. It led me to answer a call to the ministry and become ordained in the United Methodist Church. Each of these contexts has nurtured my sense of belonging.

People are craving spaces where they can belong. The new year will continue revealing the impact of the pandemic, of political polarization, of the ongoing oppression of people of color, and of the growing indifference to organized religion and an active worship life. Christians need to continue finding ways to invite people to join the messianic community. However, before inviting others to join, Christians need to reflect honestly about how truly we have lived out our baptismal vows. How truly have we lived out our baptism in the Spirit and in fire?

It is crucial to reflect on what it means to be a part of this messianic community. Our baptismal vows can help us remember that we are committed to resisting the

powers that be. It is through resisting the powers that oppress this world that we are exposed to fire—that we are baptized through fire. However, as the messianic community today, as the body of Christ on earth, we need to believe we have been sealed and affirmed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians today can be an exemplar of what it means to belong to a community in which people really care for one another and for all humanity. Of course, we cannot ignore that the last two years have revolutionized how people relate to one another, how they search for a place to belong, and how they decide to commit to a community, especially a community of faith. We need to be renewed—as do the ways we invite others to join the messianic community that Jesus came to establish for all humanity.