*TWEED JACKETS, SWEAT PANTS, AND WET SUITS*

Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

January 9, 2022

Jesus comes baptizing you and me with “Holy Spirit and with fire.” Holy Spirit and fire. That might also be translated as “with wind and fire.” Wind and fire. A changeable climate: volatile and unpredictable. Volatility and unpredictability in the spiritual climate suggests that as Christians, we have to be prepared to dress according to which way the Spirit blows.

Welcoming the Spirit’s presence into our lives today means much more than waiting to be enrobed by the wings of a dove. It means dressing our faith in garments that fit the world in which we live – the spiritual world which we have entered. The temperature and temperament that the Spirit wears in my life and your life reflect the choices we have made about our spiritual clothes. Paul said in II Cor:

We long to put on our heavenly dwelling

So that by putting it on, we may not be

Found naked, but that we should be

further clothed,

so that what is mortal may be swallowed up in life.

And the Book of Revelation speaks of being dressed in “the white robes of the righteous.”

Typically, much of our spiritual life is spent changing clothes, finding new outfits to reflect the soul’s growth. There is the “tweed jacket” phase, the “sweat pants” period, and finally, the “wet suit” phase.

The Tweed Jacket can refer to the conservative, literalistic, buttoned-up, “by the book” kind of faith new Christians often possess. Anxious to please, concerned to be correct, the tweed jacket Christian focuses on the rudiments of faith. Wearing the tweed jacket enables the established community of faith to transmit the tradition and form the heritage of its faith. At its best, a faith wearing the tweed jacket establishes a bedrock of basics for its owner. And I think you lay this bedrock of basics and build on it when we develop our own personal relationship with Jesus. A prayer of the Ancient Church went like this:

Come, O Holy Spirit, come!

Come like Holy fire and burn with us.

Come like Holy wind and cleanse us.

Come like Holy light and lead us.

Come as Holy truth and teach us.;

Come as Holy love and enfold us.

Come as Holy power and enable us.

Come as abundant life and

fill us,

Convert us,

Consecrate us

Until we are wholly thine.

Come, Holy Spirit,come!

You and I would see Jesus. We want to have that kind of faith that resonates and expands and rejoices in our God. We want to dig deep wells of faithfulness, and allow the Holy Spirit to well up within us like springs of living water (Do you sense a splashing, maybe even a recreating here, that we might call baptism?) You and I want a relationship that enjoys God, and looks for God to be transforming the way we live . . . from something that’s like death, to something that abounds with life.

You and I need a personal, lively, connection with God . . . a relationship. And developing that personal connectedness with God is the tweed jacket stage of our spiritual life. The personal relationship with God is indispensable, foundational, bedrock basic.

However, indispensible as it may be, there will come a time in the life of faith when the tweed jacket becomes inappropriate attire. A little boy, watching his father squeeze into a dinner jacket pleaded, “Daddy, please don’t wear that suit. It always gives you a headache in the morning.”

A growing soul and a complex world demand that you and I sometimes change our spiritual clothes. Hebrews 6 says,. “Let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.” Or in more common speaking, “For heaven’s sake, grow up!”

The sweat pants period of faith illustrates the believer’s attempt to exercise their faith in their daily lives. Making your faith come alive for the current generation is the challenge for the sweat-suited Christian. John the Baptist blistered the crowd’s flabbiness. No, they couldn’t claim a personal relationship with God. So what if they *were* Abraham’s children? Being God’s people meant bearing fruit that befits repentance . . . fruit that makes a difference to somebody in its mercy and love and justice. We need to find clothes that ”work out,” not merely “work.” The faith of Christ-ones is one that is public, and makes a difference outside yourself.

I remember a Sunday School class where we had a lesson on the beauty and greatness of the Temple of God. Now, it’s fine, I suppose, to have a worship space that makes your spirit expand, and feel like worshipping, but the point of worship is not our *worship*, not even stirring up our personal relationship. It’s our public activity. Interestingly, in light of the Sunday School lesson on ‘how lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts,’ just the week after, I was talking to another minister friend of mine, and he was telling me about his trip to Puerto Rico. There was a church there with 5 altars, each 50 feet high, inlaid with gold, and *rich*. But just outside was the squalor of abject poverty. Just outside the door. Had the church done right spending so much money for a building? for a worship space?

Tony Campolo, an absolutely compelling Christian speaker, and professor at a Christian college in Philadelphia, tells of going to a foreign country and visiting an oil refinery. They got a tour, and Dr Campolo asked to see the shipping department. Shipping department? Yeah, where you gather the oil and gasoline, and transfer it to trucks and deliver it. Shipping department.

Oh, sir, we don’t have a shipping department. No shipping department? No. You see, this refinery uses all the oil it produces for its own energy. There is none left to ship.

The church had better not be an organization that uses for itself all the energy it produces. The truth of the church is the public activity it has.

Tweed jackets and sweat suits. Personal experience and public ministering. That’s what this baptism of Jesus passage is all about. There is a definite flow from private experience to pubic ministry. First, Jesus was in the crowds, among the people being baptized, but Luke makes it clear that the descending of the Holy Spirit came not at the public baptizing of John, but as Jesus was praying. Here was that personal relationship, the loving connection between Jesus and the Father. And THEN the dove descended on Him. So we see that this baptism of Jesus was not human, not from John, but from God directly.

Notice also that the voice came from heaven, saying, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well-pleased.” The voice was speaking to Jesus, not the crowds. It didn’t say, “This is my beloved Son” but “thou art [my beloved Son],” and “with thee I am well-pleased.” This is the personal relationship part. God Himself was giving Jesus the affirmation He needed: that He had prepared well; that He was ready; that Jesus could, indeed, step out and be God’s savior for these humans. Jesus had developed as a man, and had increased in wisdom and stature and favor with God, too. He was now ready to be God’s saviour.

Ah, but you see? “Saviour” means His ministry had to be public, didn’t it? Jesus couldn’t pray and chant and commune with God and be my saviour. He had to be obedient, unto death, even death on a cross. “Thou art my Son; with thee I am well-pleased.” Well-pleased. God gave Him the name above every name because He was obedient. He did the work of God’s ministry, putting His life on the line in that ministry, even to death for you and me. “With thee I am well-pleased.”

We’ve talked about tweed jackets (the personal relationship building), and we’ve talked about sweat suits (where our faith works out in the world.) But Jesus’ baptism by the Spirit called Him, and He calls you and me, to wear a wet suit. Wet suits allow you to become immersed completely in a new and strange, even potentially hostile environment. Unlike other, clumsier attire, the wet suit fits our individual distinctive form perfectly, becoming our second skin. It becomes who we are. Bits of tweed and fleece from the previous stages of faith development help make the protective insulation, but the wet suit’s advanced qualities provide a confidence and an ability far surpassing its predecessors. Wet suits allow us to immerse ourselves into new and maybe unexpected, may be even hostile environments of service.

Jesus baptizes you and me with Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand. The Christian life will be sifted. The chaff—our lack of love, our reluctance, our selfishness, our immorality, our sin . . . the chaff -- will be burned off. And that kind of fire (‘He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire’), that kind of soul-surgery can be terrifying. The environment of Christ is new and strange and possibly hostile.

But, graciously enough, the winnowing does separate out and reveal the wheat. The Spirit does reveal the part of you and me that bears the kind of fruit that befits repentance. And the Spirit breathes the breath of life into that spark of faith. He fans the flame of love. (Flame of love. I think that’s the fire that John was talking about, huh?) And as the activity of the Holy Spirit becomes our second skin, fitting our distinctive form more and more perfectly, you’ll find that more and more you and I will be reaching out, and fashioning justice, and lifting up in love, and making this world less hostile and more familiar, and less dangerous for those around us.

More and more, as your faith and mine becomes a wet suit, allowing us to immerse ourselves in the life of Jesus Christ in this world, heaven will begin to open, and you and I will begin to hear, “Thou art my beloved son, thou art my beloved daughter. With thee I am well-pleased.”

Amen, huh? Amen!