

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, JANUARY 12, 2025
SERMON "BAPTISM BY FIRE"
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. **16** John answered them all, "I baptize you with[a] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened **22** and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon: Baptism by Fire

Scripture: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Last week, Dean's cousin Keith Kohatsu, his wife Cynthia, and their son Eli, came to visit and shared with us their harrowing experience surviving the devastating flooding in North Carolina last year. Their story was striking. They described how, after the floodwaters subsided, they quickly had to adapt to a world turned upside down. There was no clean water, and they described what came out of their taps was the color and consistency of chocolate milk. They shared how they had to bake all their wash in the oven to kill bacteria, just to stay safe. The situation sounded horrific.

Yet, the perspective on their story was not one defined by victimhood, but instead by seeing the places of grace and hope that came from that experience. They spoke not only of hardship but of resilience and community. Their neighborhood rallied together in extraordinary ways. Every resource, skill, and ounce of strength was used to ensure survival and support. They described a train of personal tractor trailers brought from ordinary citizens all over the county coming in daily to clear debris. Their son Aaron, a lawyer, worked tirelessly without payment to help neighbors navigate FEMA claims.

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Their church opened their doors as a distribution center for the government agencies operating in the area. They described meeting their neighbors in a way that they had never known before – as people with a deep bond of purpose, resilience, and love that would never be forgotten. It reminded me of the phrase from today's scripture: "baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire." It's a phrase that speaks both to terror and transformation, often through great trials. Culturally, we associate the phrase with people enduring extreme situations, such as a soldier entering his first active battlefield, first responders leaping to action after a terrorist attack, or in this case, disaster survivors adapting to a world of devastation.

The phrase "baptism by fire" comes from the section of Luke's Gospel that we read today. John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus, declares that Jesus would baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire refines, burns away impurities, and reveals something stronger.

The imagery from Luke is meant to signify that Christians will indeed endure extreme trials, but that God will not only guide us through it but more importantly use the experience as a tool to sanctify us.

“Baptism by fire” necessitates a painful process, much like the Kohatsu family’s journey through the flood. Their lives were disrupted, and parts of what they thought they needed—like running water, electricity, and security—were stripped away. Yet what remained was resilience, hope, and a new sense of purpose and community.

Every person who has had a true encounter with Jesus has experienced this baptism by fire in some way. God pulls us through moments that seem unbearable. Some of you may feel like you’ve never had this “baptism by fire” experience, because you simply grew up in the church and a stable home; if this is you, I want you to really consider the moments when life was its hardest, because every human being has had moments of deep pain. At the time, perhaps you didn’t realize you were going through a refining trial, but I assure you that God was at work in the midst of your difficulty, using it to shape and sanctify you according to His purpose, even if you couldn’t see it then. You, who have experienced hardship—which is every single one of you—have experienced a baptism by fire moment.

Baptism by fire moments burn away the chaff—the parts of us that don’t truly matter—and leave behind the wheat, the parts that are essential, refined, and fortified. Like the Kohatus, who never imagined they could live without clean water, power, or stability, we often underestimate the strength God gives us in the midst of trial. They learned how to endure and thrive because God fortified them through the support of their community and their own resilience. They learned that God makes us stronger even and especially in situations where one would reasonably feel weaker. This is the same for each person in this room. At some difficult point in your life, you’ve been forced to let go of what you thought defined you, only to find that God’s grace fortified you with what truly endures—His purpose, His love, and His calling on your life.

For those of you who did not experience strengthening after the trials you endured, take heart—God is patient and merciful. Even when it feels like the fire has consumed too much or left you with nothing, God is still at work. No matter how long it takes to refine what has been burned away, He will walk with you through the process, ensuring that nothing is wasted and that His purpose for you will be fulfilled.

This refining process, known as sanctification, is deeply tied to the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Spirit not only convicts us but also equips us to endure, transform, and thrive. When the Spirit works in us, He burns away distractions, comforts us in our suffering, and gives us clarity about God’s purposes. Keith and Cynthia’s story isn’t just one of survival; it’s a story of transformation through the Spirit. Their faith deepened, their priorities shifted, and their connections to their neighbors and church became a lifeline of hope and restoration. This is what the Spirit does for all of us: He uses the fires of life’s trials to illuminate God’s presence, mold us into the image of Christ, and teach us how to walk in faith even when the path is uncertain.

This is the heart of the Gospel: Jesus meets us in our pain and suffering and turns it into something beautiful and redemptive. When we stay strong with God through our difficult experiences, we are transformed. What remains after the fire is molded into

something stronger and more sustainable than we were before. Sometimes, it's only through the fire that we realize what truly matters and who we are meant to be in Christ.

So, Church, I exhort you today: take courage in the difficult moments. Know that the fire you're walking through is not the end. Keep Jesus at your side and trust that He will strengthen you. He will refine you, fortify you, and turn your trials into a testimony of His grace and power.

Let's face life's challenges with faith, knowing that God will never leave us and that through Him, we can become more than we ever imagined.

Amen.