

## THE BIG FIZZLE

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
The First Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 13, 2019

*For as yet the Holy Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 8:16)*

Today's Scripture readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of Luke have reminded me of the first time a mere book provoked me to an intense outburst of emotion. I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 12 or 13-years old, and to that point in my life books were simply not my thing. I found most of them long and boring. I could always think of something I'd rather be doing than sitting still and reading a book. So it was that when one of my teachers assigned *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, by the French novelist Pierre Boulle, I grimly began reading, knowing that I would have to write a report about it if and when I ever finished.

*The Bridge Over the River Kwai* is a World War Two novel set in Thailand, and loosely based on the construction of the Burma railroad. The story goes that the Japanese army occupying the land needs a train to run between Bangkok and Rangoon in order to move troops, supplies, and weaponry. One of the last pieces to be put in place is a large bridge deep in the jungle that would span the River Kwai. To build it, the Japanese set up a prison camp and force British POWs into labor. The ranking British officer in the camp is Colonel Nicholson, a perfectionist who struggles with the paradox of the task before him. On the one hand, he doesn't want to help the enemy. But on the other hand, if he and his men must build a bridge, it should be a good bridge that showcases the superiority of the British Empire.

As the bridge nears completion, British intelligence learns of its existence and determines to destroy it. Under cover of night, British commandos parachute to the site and with great difficulty plant explosives on all the piles holding up the bridge. The plan is to blow it sky high with a spectacular display of fireworks just as the first train loaded with Japanese military dignitaries is crossing it. If I recall, it was here that an otherwise boring book took on an exciting momentum. All I had to do was read on and wait for it. This was going to be great!

Alas, just as the train is approaching, Colonel Nicholson discovers the explosives, thwarts the plan, and saves the bridge. That's about it. What!?! I remember being outraged. I stood up, shouted something like "you've got to be kidding me!" Then with all my might I threw the book across the room. I felt cheated, bamboozled. I had done my part and read the whole book. What did I get for it? Nothing but a whimpering, anticlimactic finish.

Strangely, it was the Gospel of Luke's account of Jesus' baptism (3:15-22) that reminded me of my reaction to *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Why? I suppose the answer lies in the contrast between Luke and Boulle. Luke delivers, while Boulle does not. Luke tells us of another river – the River Jordan – where John was baptizing crowds of people in its waters. All the people were in high expectation that the long awaited Messiah was about to appear. This was going to be great (Luke 1:32) they said, and wrote, and thought. John stoked their anticipation, saying such things as "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Just then, as if on cue, Jesus came to John and submitted himself to baptism. Luke tells us that immediately afterwards, as Jesus was praying, *the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Luke delivers. But what do you think actually happened? Did a dove really land on Jesus' shoulder for all to see? Did Jesus audibly hear the voice of God? Perhaps the dove and the voice really were discernible to all who were present. But if you read carefully, Luke suggests that the dove is metaphorical: the Spirit descended upon Jesus *like a dove*. Luke also implies that only Jesus heard the voice from heaven: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" Indeed, these were deeply personal revelations at first that Jesus alone experienced as he was praying, and later on recounted for his disciples. What was their effect on Jesus? The revelations awakened him to an intense awareness of God's presence and love. Still to this day, the promise held out to us in baptism is that we, too, can receive the Holy Spirit. In the waters of baptism, we too can experience an intense awareness of the living God's unqualified love and support: *You are my son, you are my daughter; with you I am well pleased.*

But really: a dove and a voice? On Friday night at the baptism rehearsal I counseled the participants to put their cameras away for the event itself and not try to record the moment for posterity. Nevertheless, given the plethora of cameras today, and everyone's penchant for filming just about everything, I suspect that we have some rogue photographers among us. I ask you: what will their devices record? My guess is that the voice of God will not be captured. Nor will they see any heavenly doves hovering over the water. The only time at Grace Church I've ever seen anything remotely resembling Luke's special effects was on a summer Sunday some years ago. A visitor in a back pew had a trained bird sitting on his head. The man looked entirely pleased with himself, and since the bird neither squawked nor flew around, nobody bothered him. I suppose he didn't get the attention he wanted because we never saw him again.

So will that be it for those on the lookout for the Spirit in this vicinity? Does life in Christ come to nothing more than a big fizzle? Disappointment, disillusionment, even anger can be the result when God doesn't show up on cue, or intervene as we think an omnipotent, loving, heavenly Father should. The momentum of Scripture suggests that we should expect divine epiphanies, especially in this season of Epiphany. So what do you do when prayers go unanswered, the wicked prosper, and the spiritual journey results in a whimpering anticlimax? Well, if you're in Hollywood, what you do is take the story, remake it into a movie, and see to it that you blow up the bridge in the end. You'll even win the 1957 academy award for best picture – if you blow up the bridge. But as for baptism, we're told that it's unrepeatable and indissoluble. No remakes or do-overs allowed. Unlike the Eucharist, baptism is "one and done," so if you lose that loving feeling, or miss it altogether, that's it.

Or is it? Today's short reading from the Acts of the Apostles seems to address the very question of what to do if the momentum of baptism fizzles to an anticlimax. The writer of Acts describes how the new Christian movement had spread to the Samaritans, a people of the region who nurtured a hostility for the Jews. For the Jews, the feeling was mutual. So it was a great, potential breakthrough when certain Samaritans began hearing the good news of God in Jesus, and submitting themselves for baptism. The problem was, nothing much seemed to happen. They saw no dove, they heard no voice, they felt no fire, *for as yet the Holy Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*. It was as if the Samaritans had read the book, only to feel bamboozled by a concluding chapter that fizzled out to a disappointing finish. When the apostles in Jerusalem learned that the Samaritans had received the sign but not the thing signified, they dispatched Peter and John to go among them. Once there the two apostles laid their hands on the Samaritans' heads and prayed for them. Then they too received the Holy Spirit. They too personally experienced the reality of God's living presence and love.

What we see in today's reading from Acts is the biblical basis for what we've come to call the sacrament of Confirmation. Early on the church discerned that something good and repeatable had happened in Samaria, and ever since has practiced a pattern for the baptized to be strengthened

in the Spirit. In Confirmation, a successor to the apostles – what we call a bishop – comes to lay hands on the heads of those who present themselves, and to pray that they might daily increase in the Holy Spirit. Is Confirmation the only way to be filled with the Spirit? Must a bishop in the apostolic succession be present for God’s Spirit to be known and received? Of course not. The church has never said that Confirmation is the only way. But it is a way to receive strength to continue the momentum of the Christian journey, until at last we shall see face to face. It could be that these seven newly baptized Christians will want to come forward some day for Confirmation. It could be that any number of us here today will want to sign up for the process that will culminate when the Bishop comes to Grace Church on June 2<sup>nd</sup> of this year.

So Confirmation is one way. How else does the Spirit descend upon us? A verse from one of the Christmas carols we sang a few weeks ago says: *“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.* Those of you who were here on Christmas heard me speak about the Word of God as the Rumor of God. The Spirit comes to us silently when we pay attention to the rumor of God. What rumor? Well, the universe itself carries with it the rumor of God’s existence. The laws of nature and physics, the sheer size and beauty of the cosmos, the wonder of life and consciousness all suggest that the creation has a Creator. That’s the rumor. But can the Creator be known? Luke describes how the Spirit of God descended on Jesus in the waters of the River Jordan. The imagery might remind us of the moment of creation as described in the Book of Genesis, when the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. Then God spoke, “Let there be light,” and the rumor of God, or the Word of God has forever been etched into all facets of creation.

The Scriptures often liken the Word of God to the breath of God, and the breath of God to the Spirit of God. This is the voice of the Lord that we read about in today’s Psalm (29): *The voice of the Lord is mighty in operation*, is how the old translation puts it. It is the same voice of the Lord that established the laws of nature, called Israel to be God’s people, spoke through the prophets, and declared Jesus to be God’s beloved Son at his baptism. The more you ponder the voice of the Lord, mighty in operation, at work in God’s unfolding creation, the more you realize it is the same voice of the Lord that calls to you and me. When we say “here am I, Lord,” we discover that the Word of God is no idle rumor, no benign idea, but power to become a child of God. The Word becomes flesh and dwells in us.

When I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade I was sorely disappointed by the ending of the *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*. I thought the story fizzled out to an unsatisfying finish, and in anger I threw the book across the room. I have found life in Christ to be an altogether different sort of story. To be sure, the Christian journey is not marked by predictable, frequent fireworks. But we do enjoy moments when the veil is lifted, and God makes his presence known. Indeed, *the voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders*. Baptism is the beginning of the story. Confirmation can be a later chapter. What is more, the Word that goes forth from God’s mouth declares that the chapters continue from this time forth, even forever. C.S. Lewis put it this way when he brought *The Chronicles of Narnia* to a very satisfying conclusion. The final sentences in the seventh and last book of the series read as follows:

But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

In the meantime, we have the promise that *the voice of the Lord is mighty in operation. The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.*