

WOLF CREEK PASS

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John answered all of them by saying, "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. (Luke 3:16)

When I was growing up in the 1970s, pop culture went through a peculiar phase that glorified the trucking lifestyle. Truckers chattering on CB radios and convoys of 18-wheelers breaking the 55-mph speed limit were the subjects of movies, TV shows, and hit songs. One song that I particularly remember is called *Wolf Creek Pass*, by a singer named CW McCall – whose real name is actually Bill Fries. I am no musicologist, but it seems to me that *Wolf Creek Pass* is essentially a precursor to early rap, because McCall talks, more so than he sings, through a story. The hip-hop artists might accuse me of heresy, even sacrilege, so you must go online later today, listen to the son, and judge for yourself.

The song is about two truckers, McCall himself and another named Earl, who are hauling eighty-five crates of live chickens stacked on a flatbed truck. To reach their destination they have to cross Wolf Creek Pass, a two-lane perilous road of hairpin curves through the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. With Earl behind the wheel they begin descending the steep grade that McCall describes it as 37 miles of hell. Sure enough, things go comically amiss in a hurry. First, the shift knob comes off in Earl's hand as he tries to gear down. Then ashes from Earl's cigar fall onto his pants and catch them on fire. Meanwhile they are approaching a tunnel that is too low for the height of the chicken crates. What would happen? All I knew was that one day I wanted the thrill of driving the real Wolf Creek Pass.

A few years ago the moment apprehended me. We were out west on summer vacation and to reach our destination we could have dipped down into New Mexico, thus visiting a new state. Or we could have braved Wolf Creek Pass. I, of course, strongly advocated for Wolf Creek Pass. In fact, I had James add the song to the play list he was making for the trip. Imagine: we would drive Wolf Creek Pass the road, and listen to *Wolf Creek Pass* the song on continuous loop. It would be 37 miles of fun! This we did, and let me tell you, it was a major letdown. Wolf Creek Pass is no longer the 2-lane harrowing road it used to be. It is now an expanded, pleasant highway of at least four lanes. I saw no flatbed trucks full of chicken crates careening out of control with drivers whose pants were on fire. What a disappointment. To make matters worse, I've endured considerable scorn and derision from the family because they all wanted to go to New Mexico. *Alas, a prophet is not without honor except in his own country, and among his own kin.*

Strangely, the Gospel of Luke's account of Jesus' baptism (3:15-22) has reminded me of driving the actual Wolf Creek Pass. Why? I suppose the answer lies in the contrast between expectation and reality. You see, Luke delivers, while the modern road does not live up to the song. Luke tells us of another wild man behind the wheel: John the Baptist, baptizing crowds of people in the Jordan River. All the people were in high expectation that the long awaited Messiah was about to appear. 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. Indeed, the waters of baptism can awaken in us an intense awareness of the living God's presence and love. It is supposed to be an experience that changes everything – that begins your life anew. Fun fact that will make you more interesting at parties, so pay attention: Did you know that traditional baptismal fonts, like ours over there by the north aisle door, are octagonal? They have eight sides. Why? We read in Genesis how God created the heavens and earth in seven days. But God's work is not done until you and I become new creations. Baptism represents the eighth day of creation for those who submit to it. It is to leave an old life, an old kingdom, and enter a new one: the kingdom of God, life in Christ. We become new creations. So now you know why baptismal fonts have eight sides, and you can share it with your unchurched loved one and friends.

But do such high expectations match up with the reality? Perhaps you've seen in the news the story about the man from North Korea who a year ago miraculously crossed the perilous demilitarized zone and entered South Korea. He left behind the harshness of life under an oppressive regime and defected to the promises of new life in the south. How did it go? Sadly, the new reality did not live up to his expectations. It was a major letdown. He made neither friends nor money. He did not prosper, and last week defected back to the north, straight across the border. The wonder of it all is that he managed to bypass the guards and landmines not once, but twice.

Likewise, we who have crossed over into 2022 might find ourselves a bit disillusioned by the landscape around us. Our expectations were that by now we'd be long past the pandemic. But here we are, still in its grip thanks in large part to a misinformation campaign that has aided and abetted the mutation of the virus. Here we are, still polarized as a nation, in danger of losing the center, where it used to be that you could find a common understanding of what it meant to be a citizen of this nation. Where is God in these times that try our souls? Does our reality match up with the song that Luke sings? Disappointment, 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 ho-hum ride? What do you do when no holy fire burns in your soul? Is a lively experience of God's presence meant only for wild sorts like John the Baptist, and perhaps Earl the truck driver?

No, it is not only for the likes of them. Today's short reading from the Acts of the Apostles (8:14-17) seems to address the very question of reality not meeting our spiritual expectations. 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. From the Jewish perspective, 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 heard the song, only to feel bamboozled when they actually travelled the road. 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 a 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 one 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 Eloise, today's baptismal candidate, 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 5th of this year.

June 5th sounds like a long way off to me, and it is. So what happens between now and then? And suppose you've already been baptized and confirmed? Well, today as part of all three services we will be renewing our own baptismal covenant – recommitting ourselves to the way of Jesus, and praying that the Spirit of God will fall afresh on us. Also, we will break the bread and be partakers of the body of Christ, so that he may dwell in us, and we in him. If you will permit the analogy, renewing our vows and receiving Communion – these by faith are like booster shots to strengthen our immunity against the ways of sin and death that always press upon us. The theologians might accuse me of heresy, so you must get in line and try it for yourself.

In the song, *Wolf Creek Pass*, Earl and his companion had a wild ride that ended when they crashed into the side of a feed store in Pagosa Springs, CO. The implication is the two truckers lived to sing about it, although the chickens did not fare as well. As for me, driving the actual Wolf Creek Pass was a letdown, but life in Christ has never been a disappointment. You see, the Spirit is not the wild ride itself. Rather, the Spirit is the steady presence of God through all the hairpin twists and turns of life. God's promise is to be with us, from this time forth, even forever.

Many of you know the Christian classic by C.S. Lewis called The Screwtape Letters. The book is a good one for baptism. It's about the battle for the soul of an ordinary man, told from the viewpoint of the demons trying to subvert him. The demons assail the man with every imaginable temptation, both obvious and subtle. But they are unsuccessful. Always they are fighting against not just the man, but a force they call "the Enemy." The Enemy of the demons is, of course, God and the angels. God and the heavenly host work steadily to uphold the ordinary man, who is scarcely aware of his close divine companions. Until the end. At the end of the story the man dies and awakens in the presence of God and the angels. Lewis describes it in memorable quote:

He had no faintest conception till that very hour of how they would look, and even doubted their existence. But when he saw them he knew that he had always known them and realized what part each one of them had played at many an hour in his life when he had supposed himself alone. So that now he could say to them, one by one, not "Who are you?" but "So it was you all the time." ... He saw not only Them, he saw Him.

Life is like the Wolf Creek Pass of old. It is a wild enough ride on its own. Thanks be to God that the Lord of hosts is with us – at the beginning, at the end, and during every hairpin curve along the way, baptizing us *with the Holy Spirit and with fire*.