

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon—13Jan18**  
**Lk. 3**  
**“Lukewarm Faith”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

One worry that people have today that their great-grandparents didn't have is this: is my cellphone charged?

I may wonder how much time I have left on my phone's batteries. I may wonder how long I will be able to talk if I get a call.

Fortunately, in most cases, the solution to this problem is easy: I find an outlet in my office or home or in a coffee bar, and I plug in my phone.

Unfortunately, it's not so easy to recharge *our faith*. Like many things in life, our religion can have ups and downs. Like all kinds of feelings, religious feelings can fluctuate in their intensity. We can feel close to God one day and far from him the next.

It is a fact of religious life that faith blows hot and cold according to what's going on in our lives. And our spiritual condition also depends on the varying temperature of our inner souls.

As a result, there will be times when we feel our religion working and times when we don't. There will be times when we think we're on the right path, and times when we're pretty sure we're *not*.

There will be mornings, for instance, when you have to drag yourself into church. The weather may be cold and blustery; you may have slept badly the night before. Whatever the cause, you would rather stay in bed.

Sometimes, of course, we will be satisfied with the faith that we have—and we won't worry about the faith that we don't have!

In general, though, we will prefer to be inspired. As the title of a book on mystics puts it, we would want for ourselves, “Souls on Fire!”

We may especially think about our faith on this Sunday of the Church Year when we remember the time that John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. This event marked the beginning of Christ's public ministry.

On this occasion, John the Baptist contrasted the baptismal ritual that he performed on people with the baptisms that would become possible through Jesus.

Both baptisms will involve water. But John's baptism will only be with water. Jesus, on the other hand would baptize “with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

In other words, John's action was just symbolic—the water he used in the rite was a sign that the people who received baptism from him were sorry for what they had done.

By contrast, the baptisms that Jesus performed would metaphysically alter the state of people's souls. Through the supernatural power of Christ, when people were baptized in his name, the Holy Spirit would enter their hearts and would burn away the sins that plagued them and would inspire them with divine fire!

In later centuries, Christian baptism would come to be understood as “*sacramental*.” We Anglicans like to say that a sacrament is “an outward sign of an inward grace.” That means that God always acts in the sacraments.

Through the water of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, then, the Spirit of God enters the soul of the baptized person. She is now free from the emotional burdens from her past. She has been cleansed and healed and enlightened; she has been prepared to serve God.

If you make a fire in a fireplace, you know that the wood that is being burnt is in that process being converted into energy. So, too, the inner baptismal fire converts the lethargy in our souls and fills us with new energy.

And that brings us back to lukewarm faith. We don't have to be satisfied with it--because we have been baptized with fire. If we are feeling lethargic about our faith, there is something that we can do about it!

One thing that we can do to access the baptismal fire and energize our souls is to *vary* the ways that we practice our religion.

If you're having trouble finding enough time to pray at home, for example, you might make a New Year's Resolution to attend church more frequently. That way, praying with others would fill the gap left by the uncertainties in your private prayer schedule.

If you find that you're feeling stressed out by your work, you might search for ways to introduce periods of spiritual relief into your day. I realize that this is very difficult in the modern workplace—where people share space with many colleagues and have little privacy for moments of contemplation even if they can find the time.

But there are sites online that you can visit that offer prayers to read and topics for meditation. One example is Mission St. Clare which posts a new version of Morning and Evening Prayer every day following the Episcopal church's calendar. Another site is run by the spiritual writer, Richard Rohr. If you take a quick break and spend a few minutes on these sites, the effect can be rejuvenating.

If your spiritual energy is still low, however, then you may want to take more substantial measures to break out of your weariness. You can go—as many Christians do—to a retreat house where you can get spiritual teaching as well as time apart from your ordinary life. (There are lots of places that offer retreats in the New York area—and, of course, you can sign up for our annual parish retreat at Incarnation Camp in September.)

Just as investors who own stocks and bonds may decide to adjust their portfolios in order to fare the best in the changing markets, so it can be useful to adjust our spiritual “portfolios”. That way, we get the maximum gain for our inner lives.

And updating the portfolio of *the community* of the faithful can be equally revitalizing. A church's programs sometimes need to change in order to encourage its members and serve people outside its doors.

This Christmas, we at Incarnation tried a new plan to help children in need. We were approached by a nearby homeless shelter that was looking for gifts for the children who lived there.

Adrian and I were excited to have a local connection. And this link triggered enthusiasm in our parish—so much enthusiasm that the letters from the homeless children that detailed their wish-lists were quickly claimed by Incarnation members.

It's rare that an outreach project has a waiting list of people who want to lend a hand! Happily, we were able to add extra gifts to many of the children's lists so that they could also receive things that they weren't expecting.

On this Sunday when we have our Annual Meeting of the Parish, and as we begin a new year of ministry together, let's make an effort to be on the lookout for more activities that can recharge our spiritual batteries.

After all, we were baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Lukewarm isn't good enough!

*Amen.*