

Water and Spirit

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Luke 3:15-22

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Baptism of Christ

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Luke 3:15-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with 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 granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.¹⁹ But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done,²⁰ added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,²² 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.”



About 30 years after Jesus was born, there was a man in the Judean wilderness preaching a clear message about repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The man’s name was John — son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, now come of age and making it on his own. To anyone that would listen, he explained that the Chosen One, the Anointed One, the Messiah, would soon be revealed. John began to baptize those that came to him — a common ritual among the Jewish people, an action by which a person could be ritualistically cleansed.

“I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” he told those that came to him. Maybe some

understood his message — that’s what every preacher hopes. But most probably had no idea what John was talking about. “What’s this about the Spirit of God? Why would I need baptism by the Holy Spirit?” You see, the Jewish ritual of baptism was a symbolic way to cleanse the recipient and the water was a way to symbolize the washing away of whatever was unclean in one’s life. You could stand knee-deep in water and have water poured over your head and by that physical ritual sense how your sins were washed away. How could the same ritual — baptism — be performed with the Holy Spirit? How could the non-tangible Spirit be poured over one’s head and what would that mean, anyway?

Today, you can flip through the television channels most any day and find a TV evangelist. Most of them will be preaching a pretty conservative form of what they call “Christianity;” many of them preaching a charismatic Gospel; and many of our Christian brothers and sisters believe what the TV preachers are preaching.

For many Christians today, the work of the Holy Spirit is evidenced only by what are referred to as “the gifts of the Spirit” — the things that Paul lists in Romans 12 and Corinthians 12 — prophesy, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, healings, miracles, etc. So when you flip to one of the charismatic TV preachers or walk into a charismatic church service, you are going to hear the message that if you have truly been baptized with the Spirit, it will be clear to those around you because those gifts will be evident. Without the gifts, you cannot know if the Spirit has come upon you.

Our charismatic brothers and sisters accept these signs as assurance that “I am really saved;” they use them as proof of salvation, proof of God’s love, proof of a new life, proof that God has set them apart from others. These symbols of the work of the Spirit are used as personal experiences of God’s presence. They often look upon those of us who do not experience the gifts of the Spirit in the same way — those of us who do speak in tongues as

they understand that gift or prophesy as they understand that gift — as having failed to accept God’s Spirit in our lives.

Is this the only role of the Spirit if God? These charismatic Christians have a real need to experience something personal — yet it is the churches that are at fault in letting them believe that that is the *only* way that God manifests him or her self into our lives.

What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? As followers of Jesus, we take for granted what John the Baptist offered, that God’s Chosen One would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In our baptismal ritual, we acknowledge the action of the Spirit directly tied to the symbolic use of water. In our understanding of the very nature of God, we recognize the importance of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Yet we are probably hard pressed to talk about baptism by the Holy Spirit. It’s not prominent in our liberal Christian lexicon. Sometimes we’re even turned-off by such a discussion.

We are turned-off primarily because of Christianity’s abuse of the Spirit, using the gifts of the Spirit as something of a test of an individual’s personal faith rather than allowing whatever gifts God has given us to be used by God in a more corporate, communal way for the service of the God who provided them in the first place.

That’s not to say that there is no personal side to the baptism of the Spirit. After Jesus received John’s baptism, the ritualistic cleansing, something intensely personal happened to him. He was anointed as the Messiah — the Spirit of God descended upon him “like a dove.” For Matthew and Luke, this was an event that all who were present saw and heard. But for Mark, the earliest of all the Gospels representing perhaps the earliest traditional understanding of Jesus’ life, this event was extremely personal.

“Just as *he* was coming up out of the water, *he* saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on *him*. And a voice came from heaven, ‘*You* are my Son, the Beloved; with

you I am well pleased.’” These are not plural pronouns. The Spirit didn’t come on the crowd, God didn’t speak to the crowd, God’s voice wasn’t heard by the crowd. It was all happening to Jesus himself, a very personal interaction between God and a particular man.

Jesus, according to the author of Mark’s Gospel, was the only one to experience this baptism by the Holy Spirit. No one else. Only Jesus. It was a personal revelation of God.

The personal nature of the Spirit in this context is very different from the personal nature of today’s charismatic understanding. You see, in our modern abuse, we think that if the gifts are manifest in *you*, then *you* are special and *you* have the Spirit. The only way to prove it is by *you* showing off the gifts.

For Mark’s Jesus, there was no fanfare, no evidence to the rest of the world, no lightening bolt. There was a personal revelation to Jesus, “You are my Son.” He did not speak in tongues or heal or perform miracles or translate tongues or handle snakes or drink poison to have to prove God’s presence in his life. Jesus knew — and Jesus served because he knew.

That personal revelation of the Spirit’s baptism allowed Jesus to *reach beyond himself* and into others lives, reach to the world around him. The baptism of the Spirit that Jesus received was personal yes, but it was not kept personal, it became very public. It became very obvious to those around him that something extraordinary had happened to Jesus and that somehow God was with him in a different way.

That is what the baptism of the Spirit is supposed to be for us today. It’s not a test to see just how faithful you are — can you speak in tongues? Can you heal? Our baptism by the Spirit should lead us to reach beyond our personal lives. It is a much wider awakening within us, a baptism which everyone around us sees within us. So for Luke, the scene is much more than personal –

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and 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.’” Everyone heard and saw, everyone knew that the Spirit was present in this baptism. It was communal, not personal.

In the Genesis creation story, the Spirit was at the beginning of our very existence. The Spirit is described for us as a wind — the wind of God — “swept over the face of the waters.” And it was out of that beginning that God brought creation out of chaos. God brought something out of nothing once God’s wind blew across the waters.

And again, there is a certain degree of personal activity happening here. You and I would not exist today had it not been for the action of the Spirit at creation. Humanity would not exist but for that action. So it is personal to each of us, yes, but it is much more than that as well. The Spirit’s creative action — a baptism of the Spirit for all creation — was not limited to just one person. The baptism was for all — for the whole world. Without that Spirit, nothing would exist. Chaos would continue to reign.

In Acts (19:1-7), the Ephesians that Paul encountered had never even heard about the Holy Spirit. They had been baptized — John’s baptism — the ritualistic cleansing — but they had not received the action which would bring the Holy Spirit into their lives.

Paul convinced them to be baptized in the name of Jesus — a new baptism for them. And the Holy Spirit came upon them. The immediate result of this new baptism was personal — they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Yet the overall result was much more than that, it was communal — “altogether there were about 12 of them.” (Acts 19:7)

What happened to those Ephesians happened in community. It wasn’t just personal, it extended beyond the personal experience to a community-based and eventually a universal experience. The baptism of the Spirit received by those 12 helped to build one of the strongest churches of the First Century. Paul went to Ephesus not alone, but with the Spirit’s presence clearly evident. When Paul left Ephesus, the Spirit remained with him but also in many ways stayed behind. The Church grew.

By the action of God’s Spirit in the lives of 12 Ephesians, many received Jesus as the Christ.

Baptism by the Spirit of God is personal, communal and universal. It happens to anyone of us individually, it leads us to create an impact on the community around us, and the effect spreads to the larger world.

One of the things I do as I prepare sermons, is look back into my personal archives and read some of my previous sermons about the text scheduled for any given week. This week’s lesson from Mark, focused on the Baptism of the Lord, I found in a sermon from January 13, 1991 while I was serving at my first full-time church in Narberth. And I was particularly shocked to find this language in that sermon from 12 years ago.

Today we stand on the verge of war. No one can deny it. President Bush has indicated that he will use force to enforce the January 15 UN deadline for Iraq’s removal from Kuwait. That’s Tuesday ! We are faced with the tragic loss of many friends and relatives and neighbors. Our neighbors will be killed — those from Narberth, neighbors across the US,, neighbors in Iraq. Those that Jesus told us to love will be killed — because of our sin.

The same when I looked at a sermon from January 2003 – we were again poised to go to war, and again in Iraq. On the verge of war. So here we are again – not just on the verge but in the midst of war – Iraq, Afghanistan, who is next – Yemen, Iran, North Korea? I pray not.

It's the same lesson all over again. It's the same text that I have read and preached on many occasions -- 19 years ago, 7 years ago. The same lesson that pops up again every year on this Sunday – Mark or Matthew or Luke – to remind us of who we are and *whose we are* and where our commitment is supposed to be. If we have been baptized by the Holy Spirit, we will surely speak out for peace instead of war. And when we speak, our language will not be in a jumbled tongue that no one understands. It will be a clear and resounding statement about who controls our lives and our future — Jesus who is Christ, the Chosen One, the Messiah, the Prince of that Peace which passes all understanding.

The baptism that we have received will cause us to act in a very personal way. But not only should it be personal, that baptismal action should carry us as the body of believers baptized by the Spirit. And that action will reverberate throughout the community. We, gathered here today as a community of faithful disciples of that peace-filled teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, are called to love — even those who we consider enemies. We are called to lives of peace and justice.

That message hasn't changed in the past 19 years or 7 years. That message hasn't changed in the past 2000 years.

And when we as followers of the Christ join with our brothers and sisters in faith to pray for peace, a communal action occurs. And then it evolves into not just personal or communal but universal. When we call out for peace in our own lives, when we gather together to call out for peace and justice in the name of Jesus, that call does not remain just here. The call is guided by the Spirit, lifted by the Spirit, rides on the wind of God if you will, and

it spreads throughout the world. The call to peace and justice spreads beyond us, beyond our community, and into the farthest reaches of the world. Just where Jesus reminded us his message would reach.

Just as the Spirit swept across the face of the waters, so too does the Spirit sweep across the world which God created. When we shout PEACE, the Spirit sweeps over the face of the chaos of this world and the message is carried to the ends of the earth.

The Spirit of God which Jesus received at his baptism. The Spirit which the Ephesians received. The Spirit which baptized creation. That Spirit carries us into the future as we continue to pray for and work for peace — as we insist on peace.

You are invited this morning to come forward to reaffirm your baptism. This is not a re-baptism. As United Methodists, we do not re-baptize. We understand our initial baptism is a symbolic way of receiving God's grace and presence into the life of an infant, a child, a youth, an adult. What was done at that baptism can never be recreated. The grace that God imparts in each of our baptisms cannot be called into question. We do not re-baptize because it is not our place to call into question that which God has done through our first act of baptism.

Instead, please consider this reaffirmation of baptism as a way to once again experience God's Spirit descending upon you. Allow yourself to be open to however God will move in and through you. I invite you to the railing this morning to be present as the heavens above open and the Spirit of God descends on you as a dove. And let that action take you from this place with a renewed sense of what it means to be a baptized follower of this Jesus, the Chosen One, the Anointed, the Messiah, the one whom God has sent to reveal him or her self to us.

As children of God, children baptized by the Spirit of God, let us carry from this place God's message. Let the baptism of the Spirit be personal, communal, and universal. We are the last, best hope for peace because of our baptism. Allow the Spirit to work through you.

Amen.