

## Baptized With the Holy Spirit

Today, on this First Sunday after the Epiphany, we are observing the feast of the Baptism of Jesus. But our scripture readings for the day all cluster around the theme of baptism with the Holy Spirit.

In our Gospel reading from Mark we hear again, as we heard in Advent, about the appearance of John the Baptizer: how John baptized with water as a sign of repentance and preparation, and how John promised that after him would come one more powerful than him, one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. And then Jesus comes to be baptized, and as Jesus is coming up out of the water, he sees the heavens *torn open*—the word Mark uses here is very energetic, almost violent in its connotations—he sees the heavens torn open and the Holy Spirit like a dove coming down on him, and the voice of God saying to him “You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And that’s how Mark indicates that Jesus is the fulfillment of John’s promise of one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Mark never shows Jesus doing a baptism, Mark never describes anyone receiving a baptism with the Spirit from Jesus. But in this passage Mark makes it clear that Jesus is the one with whom the Holy Spirit comes, so that being baptized into Jesus means receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

That’s exactly the point we hear in our reading from Acts this morning. The story goes that when Paul first arrives in Ephesus for what will become a two-year project to found a church there, he finds a group of about twelve disciples of John the Baptist. These were people who had been trained by John, who had received John’s baptism with water for repentance, but who had no idea that Jesus had come to take up and fulfill John’s ministry. They’d never even heard about the Holy Spirit. So Paul baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and as he baptizes them Paul lays his hands on them, in that ancient and time-honored gesture of blessing—and as Paul is doing this the Holy Spirit comes on them, and they begin to speak in other languages, and to bear witness to God’s mighty works—they begin to do exactly the same things the Apostles had done when the Holy Spirit came to them at Pentecost. Even though these disciples had never known Jesus, even though they’d never had contact with anyone who’d been an eyewitness of Jesus, even though they were separated from Jesus in time and space, even so the Holy Spirit gives them the same gifts the Apostles had been given and makes them members of Jesus’ mission every bit as much as any apostle or preacher had been before them. And what gives these unnamed, obscure disciples a direct connection to Jesus is their baptism with the Holy Spirit.

So our scriptures this morning make it clear that baptism with the Holy Spirit is an essential part of being a disciple of Jesus. But in a way that still leaves us with a question: Just what do we *mean* by “baptism with the Holy Spirit”? Is there something special we can say the Holy Spirit does for us in baptism? What is there about Jesus’ experience at his baptism, or the experience of the disciples in Ephesus in their baptism—what is there that can point to *our* experience in baptism, too?

Christians of a Pentecostal or Charismatic persuasion have a very definite answer for that question. They would say that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not at all the same as the *ritual* of baptism that is done with water in a church or in a formal liturgical setting. The ritual, they would say, can be done for anyone; but the *real* baptism, the baptism of the Spirit, is more than that: it’s an inner change, it’s a profound inward transformation, and it doesn’t come to just anybody. The baptism of the Holy Spirit as they understand it is only for the true believers. It’s something you can’t explain or describe or put into any kind of words that a non-believer could understand. But you can always tell who’s received the baptism of the Holy Spirit because it shows in supernatural signs, like speaking in tongues or seeing visions or hearing heavenly voices. And it’s the people who show those supernatural signs, they would say, who are the *real* baptized Christians.

Now I think the Pentecostals and Charismatics are on to something here: baptism with the Holy Spirit should mean something profound, something transformative. But I have to admit that there is something about their take on it that makes me nervous: it seems to me sort of elitist and exclusive, saying that you have to have a certain kind of predefined, predetermined experience—an experience only a few special people get to have—or else you’re not a real, true, believing Christian. I tend to think that God is more generous with God’s Spirit than that. And we Episcopalians in general tend not to look for supernatural signs quite as much as Pentecostals and Charismatics do—so the notion of speaking in tongues as a requisite for being *truly* baptized doesn’t ring so

well with us. Yet the promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit should be meaningful for us, too, part of the Good News that we recognize and proclaim. So how can we understand baptism with the Holy Spirit in a more open and encouraging way?

I think the key to that understanding is given in our first reading today, these opening verses of the Creation story in Genesis. According to the story, at the beginning of Creation everything, all existence, is one undifferentiated, unformed, uniform, chaotic mass—the “great deep,” the text calls it. Over and around this reality-in-the-making the Spirit of God hovers—or another way to translate the Hebrew word is that the Spirit *broods*, like a mother bird holding her chicks together under her wings. Then, into the singular formlessness God speaks a word, God says “Let there be light,” and the word makes a *difference*, darkness and light are now different things where before there was only undifferentiated deep. But the important thing about the story is that the *difference* is not a *conflict*: God sets the darkness and the light in relationship with each other, so that together they make evening and morning, together they make the orderly cycle of the days. And that dynamic relationship of evening and morning, darkness and light, is held together under the hovering wings of the Holy Spirit. I read the Genesis story to say that God creates the world through difference and relationship—and it is the particular work of God the Holy Spirit to create and sustain and grow the relationships that make us real.

And if relationship is the work of the Holy Spirit, then baptism with the Holy Spirit must mean something like being initiated, being included, being empowered to join with God in God’s work of making relationships. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in baptism to open for us new possibilities of relationship with Jesus, with God, with each other, and with the world.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit puts us in relationship with Jesus. In every baptismal liturgy we say to the candidate “You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that allows Jesus to dwell in us and us to dwell in Jesus. And by that same token it is the Holy Spirit that baptizes us into a new relationship with God: because we dwell in Jesus, therefore we share the same kind of relationship with God that Jesus himself has: just as Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, so we become adopted daughters and sons of God in the Spirit. It is the relation-making power of the Spirit that allows us to pray to the transcendent and universal God as “Our Father.” And it is the Spirit that gives us new relationships with each other: because in the Spirit we are daughters and sons of God, because in the Spirit we are sisters and brothers of Jesus, therefore in the Spirit we also sisters and brothers to each other, invited and empowered for relationships of compassion and openness and honesty that make us *more* together than any of us could be apart. Writing to the Corinthians, St Paul said “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”—and the “you” Paul writes there is second-person-plural, “*all of you*”—meaning that the Spirit dwelling *among* us gives us new relationships as fellow-disciples together. And baptism with the Holy Spirit empowers us to extend those new relationships beyond ourselves to the world. When the Spirit gave the gift of languages to the Apostles, or to those twelve disciples in Ephesus, that was a gift of making relationships, a gift of overcoming barriers, a gift of gathering differences of expression into a togetherness of understanding. The Holy Spirit gives us those same gifts today, empowering us to reach out into a hurting world, to build up right relationships of mutual well-being to reveal God’s saving presence everywhere. It is baptism with the Holy Spirit, the baptism revealed when the heavens opened and the dove descended on Jesus, the baptism we receive in the name of the Lord Jesus and with the laying on of hands—it is baptism that creates this new reality for us.

In a moment we will repeat together our Baptismal Covenant, we will renew our common promises about how we will live lives that make a difference and build relationships in Jesus’ name. I invite you today to be especially mindful of how the Holy Spirit works in us to make these promises real, how the Holy Spirit empowers us for relationships in which we live out these promises in hands-on, face-to-face action. Where might the Holy Spirit be leading you to proclaim good news by word and example, or to seek and serve Christ in all persons? How might the Holy Spirit be opening up possibilities for us as a church to continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, or to strive for justice and peace among all people? How is the Holy Spirit giving us relationships where we can carry out Christ’s mission in the world? Our response to those questions is what baptism with the Holy Spirit can mean for us—today as we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, and as we live out our baptism every day. Amen.