

Baptism of the Lord C
January 10, 2016
“Shaking the Church”
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
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Luke 3:15-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.”

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

Acts 8:14-17

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

1.

Samaritans? Baptized?

Things were getting dicey in Jerusalem after Jesus’ resurrection, when Jesus’ followers were being rounded up and put in jail. Philip, one of the original 12 disciples, got out of town, taking a road trip to the north, to Samaria. He began to preach to Samaritans--they were the despised cousins of the Jews in Israel, despised because they didn’t worship the way their Jewish cousins thought they should. Well, Philip started preaching to these disgraceful Samaritans, but he had some competition. At that time the Samaritans were mesmerized by a man known as Simon the magician. He was the David Blaine of his time, able to amaze people with his magic tricks. The Samaritans said he was the “power of God.”

But Philip took up the challenge and preached Jesus Christ to Simon the magician, and to the Samaritans, and they all were convinced to follow Jesus, even Simon. And so Philip baptized them all with water and in the name of Jesus, and moved on to the next town.

Samaritans. Baptized! These were the very first people outside of Israel to become followers of Jesus, the very first to be baptized in his name- these dreadful outsiders joined the church when no one else would give them the time of day.

But it wasn’t enough. Peter and John, two other leaders in the early church back in Jerusalem, went out to visit these amazing Samaritans. And they discovered their baptism was not complete and they didn’t even know it. Their baptism in Jesus’ name did not come with the Holy Spirit. Who knows why? Everyone has an opinion about that these days. But no one knows

for sure. Anyway, Peter and John laid hands on these Samaritans and the Holy Spirit came into them and they were finally baptized completely and fully as they should be.

It must have been hard. It must have been hard for the first disciples to know exactly what to do. Philip preached and he baptized, but how was he supposed to know the baptism wasn't complete because the Holy Spirit didn't seem to be involved? Perhaps that Spirit was at work before those baptisms and during them, but most obviously after.

What does the Holy Spirit have to do with Baptism anyway? Jesus came to the Jordan River one day to be baptized. Jesus went down into the water and when he stood back up the Holy Spirit descended right away on him and he heard God's voice say, "You are my son, my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." When Jesus was baptized he was named and claimed and received the Holy Spirit all at once. Whatever the timing, somehow, baptism and Spirit go together. And then things start to happen. The Holy Spirit shakes up the status quo.

2.

Before baptism, Jesus was a carpenter. At least that's what his father was and that's what we suppose he was as well. He was the son of God, too, but before baptism he didn't have his calling yet, he wasn't out healing and preaching and turning lives upside down. Before the Holy Spirit got hold of him he was minding his own business, doing the best he could do in Nazareth with his family.

That Jesus, the one before his baptism, reminds me of many of the churches I have worked with over the years. They mind their own business, they do the best they can do, but all they have to guide them is their own best judgment. They rely on themselves to find their way forward. They have meetings and committees and programs, but the Holy Spirit has not yet taken hold of them or claimed them or inspired them or guided them. They are children of God, just not tuned in to the Holy Spirit's claim on their lives. So they struggle and wonder what to do.

3.

We don't know what happened to that first congregation in Samaria, the one that Philip baptized and Peter and John laid hands on. But we are told that as Peter and John went back home to Jerusalem they stopped many times along the way to preach to more and more Samaritans. After the Spirit arrived, more and more outcasts were being drawn into God's family.

Once the Spirit gets rolling, things start to shake all over. Jesus is the best example. He's baptized, the Holy Spirit comes upon him and suddenly he's preaching and teaching and healing. He welcomes tax collectors and prostitutes; he eats with Pharisees and common people; he touches the untouchable and forgives sinners.

After his resurrection he sends that very same Spirit onto his disciples, like Philip and Peter and John, in the upper room and they do things they have never done- preaching and healing and challenging the powerful and lifting up the lowly.

On Wednesdays our Bible Study is reading through the Acts of the Apostles. We are reading right now about the Apostle Paul. Before baptism, he hunted down Christians and threw them into jail. He was the sworn enemy of our ancestors. After his baptism, after he is named and claimed, he starts establishing churches all over the Mediterranean area—and he can't stop talking about the Holy Spirit guiding him and inspiring him and centering him on God's plans. And when his churches falter he reminds them of their baptism and the Spirit who has claimed them and will restore them to fruitful ministry.

4.

We Western Christians are "Spirit poor." We have extravagant theologies about Jesus but little to say about the Holy Spirit. In western PA I grew up hearing about those "holy rollers" and the Pentecostals over in Ohio who were healing people right in worship through the power of the Holy Spirit, who raised their hands in worship and danced in the aisles. The word in my town was "they were out of control." Turns out the Pentecostal churches are the ones that are thriving right now all around the world. And if we really examined our history as Presbyterians we would see that our Presbyterian ancestors knew the Holy Spirit better than we do. We just got into some bad habits.

So I'm proud of you. I'm very proud of you for what you are doing now. The Session of this church has begun to seek ways to work more closely with the Holy Spirit. Our meetings allow for time and space to slow down, to pray, to seek the Spirit's guidance in our work. Now we are aiming to intentionally partner with the Holy Spirit who entered into our lives at our baptisms.

I'm proud of you for participating in the New Beginnings Program. Today is our one year anniversary. New Beginnings aims to align us with God's will for our congregation and community—to encourage us to make a bold decision, guided by the Holy Spirit, that will make a difference in the lives of our neighbors.

It will also make a difference in our lives. This Tuesday the Session begins to digest the reports on various community agencies and to be led by the Spirit toward a partnership or ministry that will focus us, and define us in the communities in which we live. The whole congregation will be engaged in the final process of making this bold decision. We will begin to align our committees and programs and structure to this new identity. We are Christ's church, his Spirit will guide us.

Just as it guided Jesus into his ministry and mission.

Just as it shook the disciples and placed them in ministry to the Samaritans and others.

A baptismal hymn says:

Reborn as living members of a living Christ, we share with him an Easter life,
And the Spirit's power shakes the church of God, Alleluia!