

Holy Ghost Baptized

January 8, 2012- Baptism of our Lord B

Scripture: Acts 19:1-7

19:1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

19:2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

19:3 Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."

19:4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus."

19:5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

19:6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied--

19:7 altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

1:5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

1:6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

1:7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

1:8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

1:10 And 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.

1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Proclamation of the Word

Remember with joy your own baptism!

We say this every time a child or believer is presented for the sacrament baptism. But truth be told most of us have no memory of our own baptism unless you were an older child or adult. So how in the world can we remember?

Were you dunked, sprinkled or immersed?

Did you wear your grandfather's Christening gown or a white robe?

Who was there? Relatives, church family? Was it out in the river at the edge of town or in your home sanctuary?

As one man shared with us Wednesday at Sermon Starters, he was just in Israel and renewed his baptism by being dunked into the polluted waters of the Jordan. He promptly took a good shower. By the way,

Presbyterians believe you only need to be baptized once since God's claim on us and promises endure, but we can always renew our vows and remember our baptism as we do on Confirmation Sunday.

Christians have debated method, form, and the words said over baptism for hundreds of years. And today our Scriptures show us some different pictures of baptism. Jesus baptized in the river Jordan by John and the Spirit of God anointing him. And then we hear Paul in conversation with some new believers in Ephesus.

"Into what then were you baptized?" Paul asks some believers at Ephesus.

"John's baptism of repentance," they reply.

Repentance is a great thing. We resolve to change, to turn around, to go in a new direction. It is the starting point of faith. We spend time especially in Advent and Lent, preparing, repenting, ready to make a change.

But what happens to those new resolutions that we make like at the New Year. We plan to, commit to, desire to stick to them. And some of us will. We will eat less, exercise more, save more, serve more, spend more time with those we love or with those we have trouble loving. Such are the resolutions some have set. And will power is essential....but what happens when in February we have run out of steam and commitment? Do we just let it go and adjust our goals?

Paul is telling the believers at Ephesus that they can decide to repent, to change, but it will take something more. They cannot follow Jesus alone or on pure will power. They must be powered by the work of the Holy Spirit alive and dwelling in them. Real change, real live transformation is powered by the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in us. This is a cooperative effort of Spirit and flesh.

Speaking of flesh...

I recently watched the 1997 movie *The Apostle* with Richard Duvall starring as Sonny.¹ His is the story of a fire and brimstone, Holy Ghost, Pentecostal preacher who strays sometimes. He ends up hitting his wife's lover with a baseball bat so hard that it eventually kills the guy. Sonny loses everything. At the end of his rope, he runs away driving in the symbolic waters of baptism as it pours down rain. He is ruined and has ruined his relationships with his church and family. He drowns his car in the river, throws his wallet and identity in the water, and starts over. He stays near the river and after days of turmoil and prayer. Then Sonny walks into the water of that river and repents. He commits to being an Apostle for the Lord with a new fervor knowing that his trespasses will eventually catch up with him. He takes a new name, E.F. the Apostle. He confesses, "Lord, I've been with you since I was 12 years old. I have zigzagged off course- more zaggin' than ziggin'; but I'm gonna tell you, I'm in a straight line now."

Just as the Ephesians know nothing about the Spirit of Christ yet, Sonny had been baptized into the gracious love of God, but his life had not altogether shown the fruit of the Spirit. He went into the river as Sonny and rose up as EF, the Apostle, who was broken enough to allow the Holy Ghost to move in to his life. He is a changed man. In the days ahead, he repeats scripture "Lord, wheresoever Thou leadest, I will follow."

When I hear Paul ask the Ephesians about their baptism. I hear acceptance and grace. He is not judging them, but as an Apostle of the Lord, desires for them to know the fullness of Christ's Spirit working in their lives. And he has witnessed the Spirit of Jesus at work because he stepped out in faith, and became a part of what God was doing in the world.

Jesus himself was baptized, and the Spirit of God was upon this beloved Son. When in faith we present our children or ourselves for baptism, we step into holy water. We are asking the Spirit of Jesus to empower that person to be a child of the Kingdom. How do we know what the Spirit filled life looks like?

Look at Jesus. He sets the course for us.

Jesus didn't retreat and just do spiritual things. He was fully human and fully God. As theologian Shirley Guthrie reminds us in his book *Christian Doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit*. (my paraphrase follows)

Jesus went to parties and enjoyed people.

He talked more about what people did with their money knowing the power it had to corrupt. He spoke little about sexuality, but was interested in the health and well-being of bodies and souls.

He defended the cause of those who were despised and rejected by polite society and the establishment.

He considered human needs over strict adherence to the law.

He came to love people, not assert his moral superiority over them.

He loved enemies and did good to those who hated him. He trusted and served the God he called Father even when it did not pay off in personal success and happiness, even giving up his life for unworthy, no-good sinners.

His life was the life of one who prayed even when everything he had worked and hoped for was denied him and he felt forsaken by God.

That is the kind of life that is the result of God's Holy Spirit coming to dwell in a person.²

Jesus is our example of a Holy Ghost baptized person.

Jesus was filled with the Spirit of God and promised to send that Spirit to us. Rather than putting all our hope in the event of our baptisms, what matters most is the life that results from it. Is your life a Spirit led? Do you allow the Holy Spirit to dwell in you as Jesus did?

It was apparent with the Ephesians for they began to speak in tongues and prophesy.

Maybe that is not a gift of the Spirit that you or I possess, but the point is clear.

Faith bears fruit, the fruit of the Spirit of Jesus. That fruit is: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal 5:22-23).

We learn from Acts of the Apostle Paul, that the Spirit led life, is one that is connected to other people.

Paul is but an instrument of transformation for these brothers and sisters. When we read this passage in context of the book of Acts, we find that Priscilla and Aquila, a husband-wife team, shared the gospel with them. Apollos also had a part in their faith and transformation for he told them about John and the one who was coming. Then Paul came into the picture. All four had been transformed by the Spirit of God and allowed the Spirit to work in them. A few transformed lives lead to more transformed lives and the work of ministry is multiplied. Their part in God's missions led to millions of lives being changed.

In my own life I know that Deb, my church educator, planted a seed, that Alice, my youth leader watered. I can say that Mom and Dad, planted a seed as we prayed at meals and bedtime, and went to church, but my Sunday School teachers, Joe and Anna Templeton (and many others) watered that seed. Mrs. Mary Hanks told me as a youth, that every time a baby is baptized at church, she adds them to her prayer list which hangs above her desk at home praying for God to work in them and for their faith. I asked her why she did such a thing, she said because she made a promise at each of their baptisms to raise them in the faith.

And by the way, the Templeton's daughter, Mary, sent me a note on *Facebook*, telling me that her parents Joe and Anna, my Sunday School teachers, members of the First Presbyterian Church of York, SC still pray for me by name and for our ministry together. I was shocked and humbled by their love for me and for God's work of ministry in this place. Is that not amazing? That's pretty good for God's frozen/chosen people and the Holy Spirit working in them.

Anyone can resolve to change, to repent, but the Spirit of Jesus is what makes the difference. We can make resolutions and commitments which are important. But we must allow the Holy Spirit to work through and in us, remaining open to the work of Jesus in our lives. The question to the Ephesians, by virtue of the Holy Spirit to the people of Fort Hill Church remains:

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" and "How are you continuing to live in the power of the Spirit today?"

Have we made faith resolutions in the new year?

Resolutions to change, repent, and turn again to God's intentions for our lives?

May we all be refreshed by the waters of the gospel of grace, and allow the energy, power, and fire of the Holy Spirit to lead us into this new year.

Let us all resolve this new year to pray that the Holy Spirit will baptize us, the body of Christ in the world. And baptize us again and again and transform hearts, mind and lives here in our local community and throughout the world that God so loves.

We stand in a long line of disciples and apostles who say...

"Lord, wheresoever Thou leadest, I will follow."

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

¹The Apostle, Dir. Robert Duvall, Butcher's Run Films, 1997.

²Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Westminster/John Knox; Louisville, 1994), 295. See his discussion of the Holy Spirit.