

## **Baptism of Jesus Sunday/January 14, 2018**

**Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11;**

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### ***"In This All Together"***

Today we are celebrating the event of Jesus' baptism, but also the baptism that he passed on to his followers, and to the church.

Right here in the beginning of Mark, we have no birth story, nothing about Jesus growing up. Instead, we have the story of Jesus being baptized by John. This is where Mark begins his story of Jesus. We are told that John's baptism was a *"baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins."* Now the Greek word used here that we translate *"repentance"* is *"metanoia"* and it can also refer to a *change of mind* in the person, or a *transformation of the heart*.

So, more than calling people to come and engage in a ritual washing, a purification rite, where they confront their sins, to obtain a sense of forgiveness from God, John is doing something more. It is not just about feeling freed from your past, forgiven for any wrongs you've committed and now right with God.

Remember, that's the same thing that the Temple worship was doing, accepting sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. And that's part of why John the Baptist got into trouble with the Jewish religious leaders. He was telling people they didn't need to go to the Temple to obtain God's forgiveness.

But what John was doing, was something more. He was calling the people to *"metanoia"*, to a repentance that would not only lead to forgiveness, but which would change their lives. His was a call to a new way of life, a transformation of their hearts.

Pretty powerful stuff! And indeed, this is the same baptism that Jesus called his followers to and the same baptism practiced in the early church.

However, there is more. Our passage from the book of Acts tells us there was something going on in the early years of the church. Here, in this story about Paul and Apollos, we find out there were at least 2 kinds of baptisms being done.

Now Apollos was a Jewish man from Alexandria, Egypt who had converted to the Way, that is to Christianity, and he was gifted in Greek oratory, an *"eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures."* (18:24) He, like Paul would travel to different cities and speak out in the Jewish synagogues trying to convince people that Jesus was indeed God's Christ, and that they should believe and have faith in him. He was very convincing and strong in spirit and had developed a good reputation among many within the church.

We are told that while he was in Ephesus, some friends of Paul's, Aquila and Priscilla, were also there and heard him speak. They noted that he was quite knowledgeable about the faith but that he didn't have the whole story straight. And so they took him and *"expounded to him the way of God more accurately."*

But then we get today's passage, that tells how Paul, coming to Ephesus after Apollos had been there, came upon these people whom Apollos had baptized and found out they knew nothing about the Holy Spirit and that this Holy Spirit was indeed something that should have come upon them when they were baptized. Paul then re-baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and lays his hands upon them, at which time the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they show the signs of the Spirit, namely speaking in tongues and prophesying.

So here, Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, is teaching us that in the church, the water baptism of John, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, is not enough. That, as John testified that while he baptized with water, the One to come after him would baptize with the "*Holy Spirit and with fire*", and that this is what was manifest on the day of Pentecost, when the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So what is it that we receive when we are baptized? What is this gift of the Holy Spirit? Well, let's look at a couple of things about the Holy Spirit.

First, the Holy Spirit is not something new. The Hebrew scriptures tell us about the Spirit of God and how many of the great people in Jewish history, the prophets and leaders were filled with and inspired by the Spirit of God. In the New Testament, we hear of the Holy Spirit in Paul's writings, in the story of Jesus' birth and here in Mark's gospel, we hear of it first at Jesus' baptism. We are told that "*the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.*" There, in the wilderness, he undergoes temptation, is tested, discerns his call to ministry, and is eventually ministered to, until he is prepared to move forward into his call. And it is the Holy Spirit that drives all of that.

In the beginning of Acts, as Jesus is about to be taken up into heaven, he tells his disciples, "*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.*" (1:8). Two words in that sentence tell us a lot about the Holy Spirit. "*Power*" which in the Greek is "*dynamis*" and "*witnesses*" which in the Greek is "*martyrs.*"

The Holy Spirit is about action, power, it is that dynamic energy, that driving force that moves us. It is that thing that calls us to be witnesses, to become "*martyrs*", to give of ourselves, not merely for ourselves but for the gospel, for the sake of others, through the power that inspired Jesus, which is God's love.

But the really neat thing about the Holy Spirit? It's about how it comes upon us. Remember how with John's baptism, he called individuals. Even though he was calling for the whole nation of Israel to turn and repent, his was really an individual call.

In contrast, when the Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost, it came upon the whole group of them, gathered there in that upper room. And did you notice at the end of our passage from Acts for today, Luke adds this little thing, saying "*There were about twelve of them in all*"? He's telling us that the Spirit is about *community*. Ours is not a religion simply about personal salvation. Ours is a calling for the *world's redemption*. That we are in this all together.

Did you ever notice that when we, in the UCC, in the Congregational tradition baptize, we do not do private baptisms. We believe that baptism must be done within the community of

believers, that we are in this all together, that the Holy Spirit comes upon us, not just on the one being baptized, but on all of us, over and over again, as we celebrate and share in this life of faith together. It is within that power of community that we experience the power, the dynamism, the energy of God's Holy Spirit within and among us.

This year, as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of this beautiful sanctuary, we need to take time to contemplate all those who have gone before us, over these 200 years. All those who have come in and out of these doors. When we think of all those who have done the work of Christ's gospel, all those who have discerned the call to ministry, all those who have sought to love our God and to love their neighbor in their time and their particular situations, we should have an understanding that they have, in a way, laid a foundation. That in a sense, the spiritual ground upon which we walk here, is imbued with the Spirit with which they labored and struggled. That what they did before us, informs and supports what we now do together.

Tomorrow, is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and this wonderful old sanctuary will be filled with people, gathered to hear his words, to sing the songs of the Civil Rights movement, to remember him. But more than that, we will come expecting to be filled with a spirit that continues to call out to us today. It will be an opportunity for us to pick up the torch, that Martin Luther King and so many other witnesses, who gave of themselves, carried. Together with them, we move forward for the cause of freedom and equality, that they have passed on to us.

Here, tomorrow, we will recall another truth given to us through the Holy Spirit, the truth that "*all are created equal.*" That it matters not what our race, nationality, religion, sexual identity, or anything that differentiates us is. The Spirit shows no preference, shows no favorites, requires no special status, except an open and contrite heart.

The baptism we know in the Holy Spirit, is a baptism of *unity*. It is that force that binds us together. Last night, I witnessed that force, in the Boar's Head Feast that we held here at the church. I saw it in the months and weeks of preparation. I saw it in the commitment of so many of our people. I saw it in the practices and in the time so many of you gave. And I saw it in smiles of the children and the joy and lightness it brought to a Fellowship Hall filled with so many members of our community.

We are called, through our baptism, in Christ Jesus, to open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not just about forgiveness of sins, as important as that is. It is about a transformation of our hearts and the decision to act, to act together, to bring the love of our God to this world. Amen.