

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: The Baptism of Our Lord Sunday
Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

16 January 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“Do you have the Spirit?”

Today we have two scripture passages on baptism and the Holy Spirit that are quite intriguing.

Are baptism by water and baptism by the Holy Spirit one and the same?

Do we receive the Holy Spirit when we are baptized?

If we receive the spirit when we are baptized as infants,
why then do we pray for the Spirit to be given again at confirmation?

As with any questions about God and the spiritual realm and theology, there are no easy and no sure answers.

And yet because people want simple answers,

when we – or any other denomination – set out to teach our theology and doctrine,
we pull out certain passages from scripture, use them to shape easily packaged answers,
and then simply ignore any passages in scripture that don't fit into our package.

It's one of those things that is easy to see when we look at other denominations.

For example a denomination may say that it says in Scripture

that women shouldn't speak in church and therefore women can't be ordained.

Now we look at that and we say, “Yes, but what about the role of women in Jesus's ministry?

What about Mary Magdalene being the apostle to the apostles?

What about all of the women who were leaders in the early church?”

It's easy to see in others, but it's much more difficult to see how we've done the same thing – and yet we have.

For Lutherans, whose theology derives largely from the writings of Saint Paul,

these readings from the Gospel of Luke and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles question our assumptions.

While our Lutheran theology of baptism is far more complex than I can share in this sermon,

our short hand way of describing it is to say that baptism is a sacrament –
which we define as something that was commanded by Jesus,

that uses an element of the earth (in this case water), and that offers forgiveness of sins.

We also say that we receive the Holy Spirit when we are baptized.

Certainly Jesus did command that we make disciples of all nations, baptizing them,

and certainly baptism uses water,

but when it comes to the forgiveness of sins,

the concurrence of our theology with scripture is not so clear-cut.

Does one have to be baptized in order to receive forgiveness –
whether as a one-time event or as an ongoing process?

Or can one receive God's forgiveness without ever being baptized?

Or is baptism simply one way out of many of experiencing God's forgiveness?

We'll have to leave these questions for another time but there are more as well.

If we believe we receive the Spirit in baptism when we're infants,

then why do we pray the prayer asking for the gift of the Holy Spirit at confirmation?

As I said earlier I think what gets us into trouble as Lutherans

is that our theology derived from Paul

& it seems as if Paul happened to receive the Holy Spirit at the same time he was baptized. But as we read in today's lessons, baptism and the giving of the Spirit are NOT one and the same thing,

nor did they necessarily happen at the same time.

That's very clear in our reading from Acts.

The Samaritans had already been baptized but they had not received the Spirit.

They only receive the Spirit when the apostles laid hands on them.

And here is something even more interesting.

If you read our gospel today very carefully you'll see that Luke makes it clear

that Jesus did not receive the Spirit at his baptism either.

The Spirit came AFTER he was baptized and while he was praying.

So these passages raise questions, and I've got about five more minutes to answer them.

From my reading of scripture it appears that the Spirit comes in 3 ways...

1. First of all, every human being receives a measure of God's Spirit at birth.

In Genesis we read that God took the dust of the earth, the soil, the humus,
and formed it into the shape of a human being.

But that earthly sculpture wasn't alive until God breathed into it ruach –
the wind, the breath, the Spirit of the living God.

Based on that understanding of scripture, every human being who lives,
lives because they have the breath of God, the Spirit of God within them.

On a spiritual level, this measure of the God's Spirit in a person
is simply the potential each human being has to seek God.

Some may realize that potential; others may not.

Compare it to other qualities that exist in an infant only as potential.

A child may or may not grow up to be a brain surgeon,
but the child cannot become a brain surgeon without such potential,
so potential is the first thing needed to become whatever one becomes.

What that Spirit potential allows in each human being is the possibility of connecting with God,

2. Second, everyone baptized into the Church community has access to more of the Spirit.

If the first thing someone needs to become a brain surgeon is the innate potential,
then the 2nd thing that person needs is a place to learn all that he or she will need to know.

So just as someone goes to grade school, high school, college & (then is accepted into med school,
so being accepted into the community of the church allows the Spirit to work
providing the resources and support for one to learn about God and God's purpose for one's life
by way of worship and learning and witnessing and serving and fellowship.

Just being baptized into the Church doesn't make someone a Christian
any more than starting medical school makes someone a brain surgeon.

But living and learning within the community of the Church allows the Spirit
to give us access to resources that help us develop into mature, practicing Christians.

3. Third & finally, Scripture talks about the Spirit empowering believers to perform signs & wonders

in order to demonstrate to people the power and love of the living God,
for the express purpose of bringing them into relationship with God.

Think again of our aspiring brain surgeon.

She had the potential – the intelligence and the physical capability.

And within the community of medical school,

she had access to all the knowledge and support needed to become a brain surgeon.

But simply being gaining the knowledge is not enough.

Until she is empowered to use her knowledge (by licensing),

and until she actually begins to put her knowledge into practice, she is not yet a brain surgeon.

In the same way, while every human being has some measure of the Spirit
and therefore the potential to know and love and follow God,

not all will choose to do so –

just like not everyone with the potential to become a brain surgeon will become one.

And while some may choose to be baptized into the Church,

not everyone who enters the church will become a more Christian –

just like not everyone who enters medical school will become a brain surgeon.

We are born with the Spirit of God in us, with the potential to connect with God,

with the potential to know and love and follow God,

and the fact that you are here is the evidence that you have chosen to utilize that potential.

When we are baptized by water, we are brought into the Church community where that Spirit can be nurtured,
where we can learn all about God and scripture and theology and church history and our place in it all.

But according to our readings today, there is something that the Spirit offers
that goes beyond our potential as beings formed of earth, filled with wind, and nourished by water –
there's fire.

There was something more for Jesus
and there was something more for those disciples in Samaria than a baptism of water.

There is a baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire.

That kind of baptism is life-changing and doesn't happen automatically
when we are born nor does it happen automatically when we are baptized.

Jesus was born in human form with the breath of God in him. But that wasn't enough.
He spent 30 years learning about God and was baptized but that wasn't enough either.
It took the baptism of the Spirit to launch his ministry.

The disciples, too, were human with the breath of God in them.

That wasn't enough.

They spent 3 years following Jesus, listening to him, learning from him,
and presumably since he sent them out to baptize, they were baptized too.

They even saw Jesus die and be raised.

But all of those things were not enough to equip them for their work of spreading the gospel.

They had to wait and pray and study and worship together
before the Holy Spirit appeared and transformed their lives.

Human beings have 3 choices that we make over the course of our lives.

We can allow the Holy Spirit that God has planted in every human being
to lead us into a faith community, or we can choose to ignore that call, that potential.

If the Spirit leads us to be baptized into the Church, we can drop out,
do only enough to get by, or learn all we can

And then if we really are serious about following Jesus,
we will seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit

which will allow us to become all that God desires us to be.

How do you know if you've been baptized with the Spirit and with fire?

There are 2 ways I can think of

1. You will know if Jesus sets to work with his winnowing fork inside of you,
storing up all the grain, all the good, useful, healthy stuff,
as he burns up all the chaff, everything that isn't useful.

It's not a one and done process either.

It is a perennial, ongoing, lifelong one.

Your life is a garden planted with seeds

and if faith and hope and trust and joy and obedience and love are growing
and fear and doubt and greed are being rooted out, then God is preparing you to

2. And secondly you will know because you will be thrust out of the church,
impelled by that fire burning within you to let others know
about the amazing God that you know.

We have a choice –

we can be like the Samaritans who were baptized by water, but not by the Holy Spirit.

Or we can pray to be like Jesus and the disciples who prayed for more –
and received more than they even asked.

May the Spirit continue to call you into an ever deeper relationship with the living God.

May the Spirit continue to provide you with all the resources you need in the Church.

And may the Spirit set your heart on fire and send you running out of these walls
to tell everyone you meet about the amazing God we serve. Amen