

“With Water or the Spirit?”

In our gospel today we hear the words of John the Baptist,
“I baptize with water, but the One who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”

At our pastors’ text study this week we never got around to talking about the text,
so I went to Pastor Hoffman’s Bible study that evening.

We had an interesting discussion about baptism.

It began by someone saying,

“Well, if Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit, why do we baptize with water like John?”

Before that question go answered, someone else asked, “Did Jesus ever baptize anyone?”

And the answer to that is that

nowhere in the New Testament is it recorded that Jesus baptized anybody with water.

But he did “baptize” with the Holy Spirit.

According to Luke, he baptized his disciples on the Day of Pentecost

when he sent the Spirit - experienced as a mighty wind – and fire –
seen as tongues of flame on their heads.

And according to John, he baptized them when after his resurrection,

he breathed on them, saying, “peace be with you”.

And since Spirit & Wind & Breath are all translations of the same Hebrew word, “ruach”,

both of those descriptions of Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit –

with the mighty wind at Pentecost and his breath after the resurrection – make sense.

But then the question arose, “Then why do we baptize with water?”

And the answer we came up with is that it’s because it’s such a powerful symbol.

It was a powerful enough symbol that Jesus himself was baptized by John,

not to symbolize cleansing or forgiveness, but to symbolize what?

Well, John baptized by immersion,

so Jesus went down into the water and when he came up, what happened?

He heard his Heavenly Father say that he was his beloved child and he was pleased with him.

It was about being loved and accepted and belonging and something else.

Baptism was about the death of the old and the birth of the new –

it was the turning point in Jesus ‘s life, the start of his ministry.

So if baptism was an important step in Jesus’ life, then what about in the lives of his disciples?

Well, there is nothing in scripture that tells us that the disciples were baptized by water,

but we do know that Jesus baptized them with the Holy Spirit.

And Paul? Was he baptized by water?

The book of Acts tells us that he was baptized,

but it is not explicit as to whether that was baptism by water or the Holy Spirit,

but because Paul writes so powerfully about the experience of

“being buried with Christ through baptism into his death,

and raised to newness of life”, it seems likely that he was baptized by water.

In Acts we read about people who had been baptized but had not received the Spirit,
and we read about people who had received the Spirit but had not been baptized –
and in both cases, steps were taken to make sure that those people experienced both things –
being baptized AND receiving the Holy Spirit.

In Christian tradition, these were seen as two different things.

In the early Christian church, prior to Constantine, babies were not baptized,
because in order to be baptized, one had to go through a long Catechumenate –
which is why the preparatory season of Lent developed,
so people could learn what would be required in their new life once they became a Christian.

And what made them a new Christian was a 3-part rite
that included baptism, communion, and confirmation.

There was baptism by water – most often by immersion – and then communion.

And then the bishop would lay hands upon the newly baptized,
and pray that that person would receive the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's 7-fold gifts,
and when the Spirit was received, that was "confirmation".

Receiving the Holy Spirit was not a part of the baptism –
it happened after baptism when the person received the Holy Spirit
in a way that confirmed they were a new creation in Christ.

Sometimes – often – change is good.

But there are times when we can lose something important in times of change.

Sometimes we intentionally throw something out, but sometimes things simply get lost or mixed up.

And one of the important things I think we lost along the way
was the differentiation between baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Back before 1978, in the Service Book and Hymnal & likely in the Augustana Hymnal as well,
the prayer invoking the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's 7-fold gifts
was part of the service of confirmation – the way it had been since the early church.

And then with the Lutheran Book of Worship
that prayer was suddenly included in the baptism service.

It was also in the confirmation or affirmation of baptism service, but it was in the baptism service also.

Despite the fact that I was a liturgical scholar and my these was on the LBW

I didn't even realize that until a few years ago.

My guess is that it was done because the intention at the time was to make adult baptism the norm,
which would mean that communion would happen right after baptism,
and that confirmation – receiving the Spirit, would be a part of the baptism service.

But adult baptism never became the norm,
and by including confirmation – receiving the spirit – as part of infant baptism,
it totally lost its meaning.

You may ask what difference that makes? Why is that important?

Because by including the confirmation prayer –

the prayer invoking the Holy Spirit as part of water baptism –

we are sending the message that the reception of the Holy Spirit is assumed or automatic.

We are making it part of John's kind of water baptism

instead of the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus offers.

Another way to think about it is that Baptism is the means of justification
and receiving the Holy Spirit is the means of sanctification.

Baptism is where our sinful selves are buried with Christ and raised up to new life.

At that point we are justified.

But it's the receiving of the Holy Spirit that allows us & empowers us to live differently.

It's the Holy Spirit that's sanctifies us in a lifelong process

as we are led and empowered to live into that new creation that God calls us to be.

It is through Baptism that we are justified;

but it is through receiving the Holy Spirit that we are sanctified.

In baptism, our old, sinful self dies and is buried and a new self is raised up to live a whole new life.

But baptism / justification is just the one-time event of birth.

It is after baptism when we have received the Holy Spirit

that the Spirit begins the process of sanctification in us – and empowers us to live that new life –
which is wholly and categorically different from our life before.

Jesus was baptized by water, but as he came up from the water,

he received the Holy Spirit in a way that he had not had the Spirit before –

and it led him to begin his ministry.

The disciples may have been baptized by water at some point, perhaps by John –

that we don't know for sure;

but what we do know for sure is that at Pentecost –

maybe the way Luke describes it in Acts

or maybe the way John describes it

or maybe some other way –

Jesus baptized them with the Holy Spirit –

and that was what changed their lives – and changed the world.

Paul was baptized, maybe, even likely, by water, and it was obvious from the Spirit's work in his life
that Jesus had baptized him with the Spirit as well.

Some people in Acts had been baptized and not received the Spirit,

and some had received the Holy Spirit and not been baptized,

but the disciples made sure that they had both experiences.

For me the importance of John's words to us today is to remind us that being baptized –

being justified – is just the beginning of our own personal journeys

like being baptized was the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

But in order to live out our calling to be the people that God calls us to be,

to fulfill the plan and purpose God has for our lives, we need to receive the Holy Spirit

so that the Spirit can begin the work of sanctification in us and through us –

transforming us to live the new life, the abundant life, the Spirit-filled life

to which God calls us.

Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, we open our bodies and minds and hearts and spirits to you.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit! Free us by your Spirit! Empower us with your Spirit!

Live in us that we may live in your kingdom. Right here. And right now. Amen