

Baptism and the Spirit

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 7, 2007

I.

Today is quite a day. We baptize a young baby in the morning, ordain an old man in the afternoon, and in between we celebrate one of the church's holiest feast days. Today is the celebration of the Baptism of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and we heard in the Gospel how Jesus was both baptized by John and ordained by God to begin his ministry on earth.

When we think about baptism as a sacrament, as well as the baptisms we have personally witnessed over the years, we are compelled to recognize that baptisms are not regarded the same way by everyone.

For some people it is the beginning of a fulfilling and rewarding Christian life. Baptism can lead them to grow in Christ and live the lives they are called by their Creator to live. For others, however, baptism unfortunately can be like the story of the bats in the belfry.

The story goes like this. Three priests were at a clergy conference, and were discussing a common problem for all of them. The three priests all served at very old churches with very old buildings built years ago. Over time, it seems, that colonies of bats moved in began living in the attic of one, in the loft of another, and in the belfry of the third.

The first priest, with bats in the attic, said that he had used exterminators and fumigators, and nothing seemed to work. The bats were still there. The second, with bats in the loft, said he had tried loud noises and brought in some cats, but even that did not work.

Well, the third priest, who had bats in the church belfry, slowly smiled and said, "I went up there and baptized all my bats, made them members of the church, and they haven't been back since."

This story points out that for some people baptism is just something to be done, and that's all there is to it. It's just a box to be checked in life before moving on to the next item on the list.

II.

But baptism means more, and today, I would like to talk about baptism; not only our Lord's baptism but also our own. And I would like for us to think about our own baptisms. What, exactly, is our own self-understanding of this important event? What do we think it means? How does baptism fit into our common life here at St. Thomas?

Many of us probably cannot even recall our baptisms. We were baptized as infants and, even though we have tried to lead the Christian lives that flow from baptism, we have no memory of it occurring. We didn't ask to be baptized, and we necessarily relied upon our parents, godparents, families, and friends to help us live into our baptismal covenants.

This can create somewhat of an enigma. On the one hand we are aware of our faith and Christian doctrine. We read the Bible and have a grasp of its content. We consider ourselves to be Christians and members of a community of believers, and we are sustained and strengthened by all of it.

But at the same time, many of us probably do not have an awareness of how it all began, and we tend to take it for granted. And we might not even think that it's especially important to understand our own baptisms now.

After all, we're here in church aren't we? We have pretty much done what our baptisms called us to do in terms of living Christian lives, haven't we? Producing good fruit is what really is important, so why think too much about the seed that was planted long ago?

Well, I would like to suggest that our spiritual lives can be enriched and uplifted by a deeper understanding of what really happened to us when we went to the font or the pool, and through baptism became members of the Body of Christ. And we will see that the Holy Spirit plays a large part in that deeper awareness.

III.

Before getting into today's Gospel, which records Jesus' baptism, perhaps a brief review of our own baptismal history would be useful. Matthew's Gospel tells us that after the resurrection Jesus was standing on a mountain with some of the disciples, and just before his ascension into heaven he gave them the Great Commission.

He told them to go into the world and make disciples of people and nations, and to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus himself was proclaimed to be the Son of God at his baptism, he also recognized that we become children of God when we are baptized. This is carried forward in the Book of Common Prayer in our baptismal liturgy.

Through our baptism we share Christ's death and resurrection. St. Paul says in the Book of Romans that we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

That's quite a statement. It means nothing less than the thought of being laid beside Christ in his tomb at our own baptism, and being one with him in his resurrection.

John Chrysostom, a fourth century saint of the church whose prayer is memorialized in the Book of Common Prayer, described our baptismal covenant in this way:

In worldly affairs, whenever someone wishes to entrust his business to anyone, a written contract must be completed. The same things holds true now, when the Master is going to entrust you not with mortal things which are subject to destruction and death, but spiritual things which belong to eternity. This contract is called faith. However, it is not on paper nor written in ink; it is in God and written by the Spirit. The words which you utter here are registered in heaven, and the agreement you make by your tongue resides indelibly with the Master. The words are few but their power is great. The angels who are standing by and the invisible powers rejoice at your conversion, receive the words from your tongues, and carry them up to the common Master of all things. They are inscribed in the books of heaven.

IV.

With that background about our own baptism, let's look at look at today's Gospel reading about Jesus' baptism. For me, two questions immediately arise. The first is, why did Jesus even have to be baptized? He was the Son of God, and was without sin. What was the purpose of his baptism? The second is what are these apparently different types of baptisms? We heard about baptism by water, and then baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire. What does all this mean?

Theologians have argued about the first question for centuries. Some regard Jesus' baptism as the official launching of his ministry. Others say it was fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. There are a variety of other theories as well.

For me, and for many Episcopalians, Jesus' baptism did two things. The first was the way in which it expressed solidarity with human predicament, and it showed how he is willing to take on our burdens. Just as Jesus ended his earthly ministry by going to the cross to take on our sins to save us in the next life, he also, at his baptism, foreshadowed that event by identifying with us and our condition in this life.

And the other effect of Jesus baptism was to sanctify baptism and infuse it with a holy character for all time. Jesus' own baptism made baptism holy for us. His baptism made it transformative for us, and by this I mean that when we are baptized something inwardly and internally holy actually happens. It is not just words and gestures. We enter into a new state of spiritual life. It is a state in which we belong to God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This reference to the Holy Spirit leads to the next question I mentioned earlier. In today's Gospel John said he baptized with water, but that Jesus would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. Does this mean that baptism by water is just part of the process, and that we must somehow also have another type of baptism? Is there still another ritual to go through?

The answer to that question is "no." Our baptism is once and for all, forever and for all time, and is complete when it occurs. When John the Baptist was doing his work, he was acting at a different stage in the history of humanity's redemption from sin. The Holy Spirit had not yet come into the world. And even at Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit was only revealed as descending on Jesus himself. There is nothing to suggest that the Spirit remained for others.

And in fact, the Spirit could not remain in the world when Jesus himself was in it. It was only after the resurrection and ascension, when the Spirit came in tongues of fire at Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit was given to us.

That is what John the Baptist meant when he said Jesus would baptize with fire and the Spirit. He was anticipating the true significance of Pentecost, and was prophetically proclaiming what would be available to us as believers if we accept Jesus as our savior.

For us today, as a result of Jesus' baptism and Pentecost, we receive the Holy Spirit at the time of our baptism, even if we are infants and don't realize it. In that sense baptism gives us the opportunity to claim our inheritance as children of God.

It is like we inwardly receive the Spirit at baptism as a glowing ember that remains within us all our lives. But that ember, to be truly effective in an outward way must be fanned into flames so that it acts upon us, and through us, and enables us to live our lives in truth and Spirit as we are called.

That requires us to do something, and today's Gospel leads us in that direction. Let me read from Luke again, where he said, "when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended." Note that the Holy Spirit did not actually become manifest during Jesus' baptism in the water itself, but afterwards as he was praying.

That is the key for Christians now. We can be baptized and receive the Spirit, but we must intentionally, through prayer and the examples of our lives, ask the Spirit to lead us and to show forth through us if we seek to realize the fruits of our Christian initiation.

V.

So, baptism is a really big deal. And even though we might not recall how it actually happened for us, it is important that we appreciate what it means for us. And if we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, then we will have the blessed assurance that comes with our faith. If the Holy Spirit goes before us into the world we cannot fail

If the Holy Spirit goes before us, then the words of our own Baptismal Covenant, which may have been spoken for us even before we knew how to speak, can become realities. I pray that those words are never far from our hearts and minds, and I would like to read them again today. Here again are the promises of our baptisms by which we are bound to the Lord. They are:

- To continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer.
- To persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord.
- To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
- To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Powerful words. They express strong promises. They confirm that we are members of the Body of Christ. And they are the way to a holy life *Amen*.