

Foundation Of Our Faith

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 10, 2010

I.

Last Sunday's Gospel from Luke described how Jesus became separated from Mary and Joseph when he was twelve years old. They thought he was lost and finally found him at the temple. Jesus explained that he had to go to his Father's house. And it was clear that he meant God the Father (2:49). Jesus claimed divinity as God's Son when he was twelve.

Today's Gospel is Luke's next description of Jesus. He now was thirty years old (3:23) and was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. And God's voice came from heaven and confirmed what Jesus already had told Mary and Joseph at the temple eighteen years earlier. God said "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And don't we wish the Bible tells us something about those intervening eighteen years of Jesus' life? We can only speculate about what he thought and did as he grew up. But it is clear from the two stories that during those eighteen years Jesus knew he was the Son of God, and he still called upon John to baptize him. That means baptism is central to our relationship with God.

John the Baptist also knew of Jesus' divinity. He diminished his own ministry of baptizing with water, and proclaimed that Jesus was coming to baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

And so this story of Jesus' baptism, which is in all four Gospels, raises two interesting questions. First, why did Jesus have to be baptized? He knew he was the Son of God, and was without sin. What could baptism add? Wouldn't his teachings, and his miracles, and his death and resurrection speak for themselves? And second, what is this business about Jesus baptizing us with fire and the Holy Spirit? Isn't baptism with water sufficient? Is there still another ritual?

II.

Let's begin with why Jesus, of all people, had to be baptized. Theologians and biblical scholars offer several reasons. Some relate to Jesus and his work, others relate to us and our faith.

There can be at least two reasons from Jesus' perspective. One is that his baptism announced the beginning of his ministry. It represented his anointing by God for the difficult work he would do in the world. The other reason is that the Holy Spirit came to strengthen him for that work.

But it didn't end there. Jesus' baptism also has meaning for our own baptisms. Even though he was free from sin, his baptism linked him in solidarity with all of the human imperfections and weaknesses that lead us to depart from God's will. His baptism established that our baptisms could cleanse us and help us be more like him.

Jesus' baptism also sanctified our own baptisms and infused them with a holy character for all time. His baptism made our baptisms holy, and established the foundation for the sacrament of baptism in the church today. When we are baptized, we are linked to his death and resurrection so that we might have new life in him in this world and the next.

But even though baptism is a sacrament, not everyone treats it in the same way. For some people it's the beginning of a fulfilling Christian life. It can lead them to grow in Christ and live into their faith. For others, however, baptism never becomes that essential foundation. Their baptisms can be something like the familiar story of bats in the belfry.

I might have told this before, but it continues to make the point. Three priests were attending a clergy conference, and were discussing a common problem. They all served at very old churches

with very old buildings. Over time, it seems, that colonies of bats moved in and began living in the attic of one church, 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 priest, with bats in the loft, said he had tried loud noises and even brought in some cats, but that didn't work either.

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

This story describes life. Some people are baptized and don't go back. For them, baptism seems to be just a box to be checked on life's "to do" list before moving on to the next item.

But baptism means more, a lot more. And as we think about why Jesus was baptized, we also might think about our understanding of our own baptisms. What does it actually mean for us? How does baptism fit into our common life here at St. Thomas?

III.

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 might have no memory of that essential first step. And others of us who were baptized later in life might not remember it as an especially life-changing event.

After all, we're here in church, aren't we? We've pretty much done what our baptisms called us to do, haven't we? Producing good fruit now is what's important, isn't it? So why spend time thinking about the seed that was planted long ago?

Well, I would suggest that our spiritual lives can be enriched by a deeper understanding of what really happened to us when we went to the font, or the pool, or the river, and through that holy sacrament became members of the Body of Christ.

When Jesus was baptized the entire Holy Trinity was evident. The Father spoke from the heavens, the Son was in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. All three were in the world at the same place at the same time.

We also are baptized in name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and for us the Holy Spirit is transformative and occupies the central role. When we are baptized something inwardly and internally holy actually happens. It's more than just words and gestures as we stand around the font. The Holy Spirit actually enters us with the potential to take us into a new spiritual life in which we belong to God and become God's children.

I might explain this with an analogy. Christian baptism is like Christian marriage. The words the priest says actually cause something to happen. They are more than just words.

During the marriage ceremony, for example, the priest pronounces that the couple are husband and wife, and those words actually make it happen. They are not husband and wife until the priest says it, and they are husband and wife immediately after the priest says it. If something unexpected stopped the rest of the marriage ceremony, and everyone left the church never to come back, the couple still would be married. The words themselves call something into being.

The same thing occurs during baptism. At the conclusion of the ritual, the priest says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever" (BCP 308). That's when it happens. You can't see it but it's there. That's when we inwardly receive the Holy Spirit through God's grace, and the Spirit is sealed within us.

IV.

But merely having the Spirit is not enough. We also are called to actually live in the Spirit. This addresses the second question I mentioned earlier. What did John the Baptist mean when he said he baptized with water but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit?

We might imagine it this way. We receive the Spirit within us as a glowing ember at our baptisms. And that ember always will be there even if we go through periods of unbelief, or never believe.

But just having the Spirit as an ember does not automatically mean we have faith or are saved. Something else must happen. That ember, to be effective, must be fanned into flames so that it acts upon us, and shines through us, and enables us to live fruitful and abundant lives in Christ.

That kindling of the ember is baptism with the Holy Spirit. It's not a second baptismal ritual, but the spiritual fulfilling of the first. Having received the Spirit in baptism, we then surrender ourselves to the Spirit to complete the relationship God wants to have with us.

In some churches this is called fire baptism. Others equate it with being born again or converted. Terminology varies, but the meaning is the same. For some people it never happens, and for others it can happen in an instant. But for most of us it's a gradually unfolding process. The way in which the Spirit comes to life within us might be like getting soaked immediately in a heavy thunderstorm, or getting soaked slowly over time in a light drizzle. Either way we get soaked.

This presence of the Spirit also is a reason to baptize infants. That the Spirit enters us at baptism is justification for baptism at any age. It's not essential that infants understand baptism, but it is important that they receive the Holy Spirit. Fulfillment of the Baptismal Covenant comes later with understanding as the embers become flames, and as they accept Jesus in their lives.

St. Paul described this in his letter to the Romans (6:4-5). He said we are buried with Christ by our baptism into his death, so that just as he was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life through the Spirit.

That's quite a statement. It means nothing less than the image of being taken back in time and laid beside Christ in his tomb at our baptism, and then being raised to a new life in him through his resurrection when we fully accept him as our Lord and Savior.

V.

So, baptism is at the core of to our faith. Even though we might not recall how it happened, it is important that we appreciate what it means. And if we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, we will have the assurance and peace that comes with our faith. If the Holy Spirit goes before us into the world, we cannot lose our way.

And if the Holy Spirit goes before us, then the words of our own Baptismal Covenant, which might 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 now. 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, the breaking of bread, and prayer.
- To persevere in resisting evil, and, when 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 person.

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.*