

Pastor's Message – 1/10/2021  
Acts 19:1-7      Mark 1:4-11

Our passage from the gospel of Mark today tells the story of Jesus' baptism. That baptism seems almost a footnote; most of the passage actually describes John the Baptist. John baptizes with water, but the One who is coming, the One who he announces, will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus comes for baptism and those who are followers of Jesus are also baptized. Most of us have probably been baptized with water, but who among us has been baptized with the Holy Spirit? What is the difference between the two? What do those who have been baptized by the Holy Spirit look like and why is that better or is it even necessary?

As far as we can know, the baptism of the twelve in Ephesus which was administered by Paul, and is the story told in the Acts passage today, would have been physically identical with the baptism they had already received. What then was the difference that made re-baptism important? John's baptism was one of repentance. Paul's baptism, however, was "in the name of the Lord Jesus" and affirmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit. In other words, John's baptism centered on changed hearts, while Paul's baptism centered on a new relationship with God.

This profound difference was not in the act of baptism itself, but in the meaning of baptism for the recipient. It is possible for baptism to become meaningless. It is possible for baptism to have no effect whatsoever. Anyone can be baptized. Adolf Hitler was baptized, as was Al Capone. Joseph Stalin, too, is said to have been baptized. What did baptism mean for them?

When telling our faith stories, few people will begin with baptism and rarely do we even mention our baptism. In the traditions of mainline denominations, some might mention their confirmation, but even that is rare. Our baptism is rarely an issue unless proof of it is required for marriage or church membership. The question sometimes comes up in discussions about infant baptism.

Were you struck at all by Paul's question in Acts, "What kind of baptism did you have?" Does it make a difference and what does it mean to be baptized? The question can become heated in different traditions regarding infant baptism versus what is sometimes referred to as "believer's baptism." I have sometimes been concerned if the people I have baptized and the parents of children I have baptized really understand what they are getting into and what that baptism means to them.

The passage from Acts explores the work of the Holy Spirit. The Book of Acts mentions the Holy Spirit perhaps more than any other book in the Bible. But before we get to Acts, let's first examine what the Old Testament has to say about the Spirit. After all, the Holy Spirit does not make an appearance until after Jesus appears on the scene. God's Spirit has always been a part of our story of faith.

There are basically three major emphases we can identify that are associated

with the work of the Spirit in the Old Testament. The first is the Holy Spirit as an agent in creation. This is an almost completely impersonal representation of the Spirit, by which the awesome power of God is said to have swept across the earth, leaving creation behind in its path.

The Old Testament also portrays the Holy Spirit as a source of inspiration and power. In these instances, the Holy Spirit becomes a vehicle of God's revelation and activity. Israel's leaders—from Moses to Joshua, Judges, David and Solomon, all the way down to the "Servant of God" Isaiah, are all said to have received their wisdom, courage, and power as gifts resulting from the possession of God's Spirit. We see this Spirit at work especially in the prophets, who are said to have been possessed by God's Spirit to such a degree that all that they say and do is attributed to being the words and work of God. It is as if they are completely taken over by God's Spirit, so that their whole bodies and minds and beings become vehicles for God's Word to be spoken to human beings.

Last in the Old Testament is the idea of the Holy Spirit as God's presence in the community of God's people. The Spirit is associated with the hope of Israel and God's plan for them in the unfolding of their history.

Things get more complicated when we get to the New Testament. Some of the Old Testament sense of the Holy Spirit continues, particularly the idea that the Spirit gives power to human beings. It is the Spirit of God that endows Jesus with power as the Messiah, and it is the Spirit of God that empowers the church for its mission in the world. So, for Christians, the Holy Spirit comes to represent both the presence and activity of God and the continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world.

Paul meets some followers of Jesus who have been baptized with water, but have never encountered the power that motivated Jesus' disciples: the power given them in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So, Paul baptizes them again. The proof that this second baptism is efficacious and has meaning is apparent when they begin to speak in tongues. But we never hear just what it was they spoke or prophesied in tongues. If today's followers of Jesus have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, what tongues do they speak in and what do they say?

If we claim to be followers of Jesus and claim our baptisms, what tongues do we speak in? When do we realize that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us as well?

When we are filled with the Spirit, we become infectious, spreading the "virus" of God's kingdom.

This past year we have been unable to avoid all the issues revolving around the coronavirus pandemic. Just when humanity was beginning to feel smugly safe with its ability to track down and wipe out "germs," other communicable diseases have arisen. Not so long ago, it was Ebola. Before that was the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) to make us all feel vulnerable and at risk again. Some have compared the

effects on society of our virus du jour to the 1918 flu epidemic. I'm sure there are other communicable diseases and pandemics that may spring to mind for you.

But there are communicable graces as well as communicable diseases. Transmitting the Good News of the gift of Jesus Christ through God's grace is the witness of the Holy Spirit. Paul was anxious to make sure all who confessed Christ experienced the Spirit so that the gospel could spread quickly through the world.

There is great division in the world today. It is not between rich and poor, black and white, Jew and Gentile, male and female. It is the division described in the Letter of Jude 18-19 and in the Book of Acts 2:1, 4.

Jude writes in verses 18-19: "In the last time there will be scoffers indulging their own ungodly lusts ... devoid of the Spirit."

Acts 2:1, 4 says, "They were all together in one place .... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit."

There is great division in the world today: those who are devoid of the Spirit and those who are filled with the Spirit. Those who are dead weights and those who are all energy, cadence, movement. Those who go through life spreading viruses and those who go through life spreading seeds.

Earlier in this century, a woman went to her doctor with a catalogue of complaints about her health. The physician examined her thoroughly and became convinced that there was nothing physically wrong with her. He suspected it was her negative outlook on life, her bitterness and resentment, that was the key to her feeling the way she did.

The wise physician took her into a back room in his office where he kept some of his medicine. He showed her a shelf filled with empty bottles. He said to her: "See those bottles. Notice that they are all empty. They are shaped differently from one another, but basically they are all alike. Most importantly, they have nothing in them. Now, I can take one of these bottles and fill it with poison -- enough poison to kill a human being. Or, I can fill it with enough medicine to bring down a fever, or ease a throbbing headache or fight bacteria in one part of the body. The important thing is that I make that choice. I can fill it with whatever I choose."

The doctor looked her in the eye and said, "Each day that God gives us is basically like one of those empty bottles. We can choose to fill it with love and life-affirming thoughts and attitudes, or we can fill it with destructive poisonous thoughts. The choice is ours."

What will you choose? To be one who communicates grace or one who communicates disease? It's your choice. To be filled with the Spirit or devoid of the Spirit? The key to being a seed-planter, a sower of grace, is to be intentional. Disease is often caused by thoughtlessness, carelessness or even just plain ignorance. Cholera still threatens people all over the world who still rely on unsafe and unsanitary water sources. No one is intentionally bent on starting a cholera epidemic, but where water

quality issues are neglected, it can happen.

Though many of us have good intentions, we all know how hard it is to keep them from becoming mere pavement on the road to hell. Intentionally communicating grace takes more than desire, it takes a plan and a strategy. It is far too nondirective to declare to yourself each morning, "Today I will be Spirit-filled."

So how do we become infectious, "catching"? Consider what might happen if everyone of us should memorize this saying, "Life is too short to be ...." At the dawn of each new day, get up and say to yourself, "Life is too short to be ..." (and fill in the blank). One day it might be, "Life is too short to be little." Another day it might be, "Life is too short to be bitter." Another day, "Life is too short to be angry." Another day, "Life is too short to be jealous." Another day, "Life is too short to be petty." Another day, "Life is too short to be self-pitying." But every day, "Life is too short to be ... (something)."

On the day we declare, "Life is too short to ... hate anyone,"  
we can plant seeds of love.

On the day we declare, "Life is too short to be ... bitter,"  
we can plant seeds of acceptance.

On the day we declare, "Life is too short to be ... afraid,"  
we can plant seeds of risk and courage.

On the day we declare, "Life is too short to be ... jealous,"  
we can plant seeds of joy and gratitude.

When we are baptized in the Spirit, we are an echo, as Jesus quoted Isaiah. We, too, proclaim sight to the blind, release to the captives and the time of the LORD's favor for all people. Every day that you wake up and are aware of God's presence in your life, that's a conversion and a baptism into and by the Spirit of the LORD. One of the surest beliefs about being a Christian is the faith that God always has more for us.

In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, on the banks and in the middle of the Jordan River, God had more for people who heard John the Baptist. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth, in Ephesus where Paul met twelve new believers, God had more for those who had only received John's baptism.

Christians have disagreed over (and argued about) the meaning of baptism and the experience of the Holy Spirit's gifts; however, the most helpful way to conceive of both baptism and God's spiritual gifts is that God has more for us for service.

Baptism initiates us into God's family but also begins our living for God. The Holy Spirit's gifts aren't granted to thrill us or to impress others but to equip us in living for and serving God. Finally, when we've become thoroughly used to and used up serving God on earth, we'll someday experience that God has even more for us in heaven.