

## SERMON

### BAPTISM OF JESUS SUNDAY – YEAR B

“THAT’S THE SPIRIT!”

ACTS 19:1-7 / JANUARY 7, 2018

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

There’s a story from the early days of Henry Ford, the legendary car manufacturer. It tells of a machinist with Ford Motor Company who had ‘borrowed’, over a period of years, tools and an assortment of automotive parts. Though this was against company policy, it seems everyone did it, and management did nothing about it.

However, one day this machinist began attending church, and eventually was baptized. The day after his baptism, he collected all the tools he had accumulated over the years, loaded them onto his pickup, took them to the plant and presented them to the foreman with his confession and appeal for forgiveness. The foreman was so overcome by his honesty that he cabled Henry Ford himself, who was in Europe at the time.

After detailing the entire event, Ford immediately cabled back this response: “Dam up the Detroit River and baptize the entire plant.”

This Sunday is known as the baptism of Jesus Sunday. And, fittingly, we have celebrated the sacrament of baptism in baptizing Klaira. It is a momentous event in Klaira's life and in the lives of her family members. It is a momentous event in the life of any person; but it is not an event that is an ending; rather it is an event that is the beginning – the beginning of what we hope and pray are countless momentous events that flow from the act of baptism – the start of a life of faith as the baptized person is given the opportunity to learn about, and then live according to, the teachings and example of Jesus.

Our scripture reading from the book of Acts provides some instruction in this regard. The passage mentions Apollos, an itinerant evangelist who led a number of people to believe in Jesus. When Paul traveled through Ephesus after Apollos had moved on, he discovered that the believers there had been baptized “into John's baptism.” Apparently, this was deficient in some way and so Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus. Paul had asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” We might well ask, “What in the world made Paul ask them that odd question.

I know if I were to come upon a group of fellow Christians, I'm certain the first thing that I would say to them would **not** be the question, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” Why would Paul ask such a question? Perhaps Paul asked that question because something about the way they conducted themselves belied their claim to be Christians. Perhaps these Christians, for some reason, did not display all the outward signs of the Spirit's presence in their lives. Perhaps the gifts of

the Spirit were not readily obvious to Paul and their unlikely behaviour prompted Paul to ask in essence, “Has the Holy Spirit touched your life?” And the answer they give to him, in essence, is, “No, what is that?”

These folks had encountered the ritual of baptism, had received the water, but had not received the Spirit that would guide them and empower them to live into the promises made at baptism. Apollos baptized them understanding baptism in the way that John the Baptist understood baptism. His was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John’s baptism points almost entirely to a personal turning away from evil and toward good. But baptism in the name of Jesus is much broader and deeper.

It calls upon the Spirit of God to empower people – the baptized person and those supporting the baptized person – to be faithful followers of Christ. The gift of the Spirit in Christian baptism is intended to sweep people up into the dynamic of the Spirit. It drives believers to participate in the mission of God in the world in which the church is a partner. The Spirit empowers them to witness in word and deed to the reality of life in Christ.

When Jesus was baptized, it marked the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. And that is the same with us. In baptism, we begin our ministry. When we are children, our parents, families and congregations serve as the model for the shaping of our ministry. That is a life-long process as we seek to live fully in the way of Christ.

This Sunday is a time to remember our baptism with great thanksgiving. In that special moment God acted to gather us into the love, care, and nurture of the church – the body of Christ. In that special moment and in that corporate act, the Holy Spirit reminds each and every person present of the promises made for us at our own baptism. It is a call to the whole community to live out those promises, and to support and nurture that newly baptized Christian.

Christian baptism is not just some water being splashed or poured or being immersed in. It is water and the Spirit. Certainly, it carries with it the meaning of John's baptism – of turning away from one way of life to God's way of life for us. But it also declares the love God has for us as God's very own children. Furthermore, it is a rite of initiation into the world-wide Christian community, inviting and encouraging the baptized person to be part of a community that seeks to learn about, and live into, the way of Christ.

At one time, salt was such an important symbol in the early church that when water was sprinkled on a person's head in baptism, a pinch of salt was placed on the tongue. Salt came to symbolize that as a baptized person is purified in Christ, that person is called to be a purifying agent in the world.

Baptism is not a one-time deal. Though there may be only one ceremony, living our baptism is something that occurs every day. The key element is the living presence of God in the life of believers. Baptism is the public celebration and commitment of the one being baptized to become part of a

community of Christians that seek to live in the way of Jesus Christ. Paul's question to the believers, whether they have received the Holy Spirit is intended to ask if they are aware of, open to, filled with, and guided by the Spirit of God. That constitutes the key question of this passage.

Ultimately our life in Christ is not just about any particular event that might have taken place at some point in our life of faith. Those moments – if and when they happen – are gifts from God to be treasured. But they constitute starting points, not ending points. After Paul had baptized them, they were not finished. They still had much to learn and much to bring to life as the Spirit moved them.

If their active life in the Spirit ended there, then they would still be missing the point of what the Holy Spirit makes possible. In fact, as their story continues, after Paul's initial contact with them, he spent two years in Ephesus in discussion in the synagogue and in a lecture hall, and he took those believers along with him. One crucial aspect of baptism is not what happens when we're baptized but what happens after we're baptized.

Of course, there are many Spirit-filled people who are not baptized. Baptism is not magic; and it does not confer salvation on anyone. In other words, you aren't consigned to hell or purgatory or limbo – as some religious traditions historically have invented – if you aren't baptized. But to be baptized or to have your child baptized is a public celebration of God's love for us and a public profession of faith and commitment to learn about, and live in, the way of Christ.

The act of baptism is a gift of God we share with family members, friends and a congregation of Christians. It is a moment in time to be treasured. But to use the old saying, 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating.' The proof of the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us throughout our lives and which we receive with celebration in the rite of Christian baptism is the way in which we live our lives, how we relate to God and how we relate to others.

Of course, we make mistakes. We go astray at times. We don't always live up to our baptismal vows. We don't always speak or act in the way of Christ. We are human. But our forgiving, loving God offers us the wisdom and guidance and power of God's Spirit to help us move towards the goal, falteringly at times, of learning about, and living our lives in the way of, Christ.

Jasmine and Carlin, by having Klaira baptized today you are saying, "Yes, we want this for our daughter." You are saying, "We believe that it is important for her to know and love God." You are saying, "we promise that we are going to help our child to live by this essential commitment." It is a wonderful thing you have done today for Klaira. The promises you made today will pave the way for Klaira to find spiritual fulfillment, purpose, meaning and joy in this life.

We all know this world can be a rough place – and at times it can be a very cold and lonely place. What we need perhaps more than anything else is the assurance that we count, that we matter, that we are persons of value and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. That, I think, is one of

the things baptism does for us. It says that no matter who we are, no matter what our age or condition may be, ***we matter***, to God.

Even when the world rejects us, even when people push us aside, the fact that we are baptized signals to us, and to others, that we count in the eyes of God. The great founder of the protestant reformation, Martin Luther, whenever he had feelings of doubt or despair, he would say to himself by way of reminder, “I was baptized.”

That is the good news we need to hear as we begin a new year that will be full of both blessings and disappointments. More than anything else, we need the assurance that God will give us the strength we need no matter our circumstances. We need to know that we count in the eyes of God. May we, like our saviour Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, come to know that we are, indeed, God’s beloved children in whom God is well pleased. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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