

“Who is the Holy Spirit?”
Baptism of the Lord
Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11
A Sermon by Rev. Paul Hibbard
Woodbury UMC
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On the liturgical calendar this Sunday is known as “Baptism of the Lord.”
When we think of baptism the first image that often comes to mind is...what? WATER

In the past, we often had an opportunity to reaffirm our baptism by coming forward to the baptismal font and touching the water as we were reminded to “Remember our baptism and be thankful.”
But while water may be the first thing that comes to mind when we hear the word baptism, baptism is not simply about getting wet.

Both of today’s New Testament texts share baptismal stories. Mark’s Gospel shares the story of Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River. The Book of Acts shares a story of Paul baptizing 12 disciples he ran across in Ephesus. Neither of these baptismal stories focus much on the water. Instead, they focus on something else that we may too often fail to. I believe that the main focus of these two stories is the Holy Spirit.

In Mark we see the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, followed by a heavenly pronouncement, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
In the Acts of the Apostles, after Paul baptizes these 12 disciples, we read that “the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied...”

Even in our baptismal rites, including the reaffirmation, after we “get wet” these words are read: “The HOLY SPIRIT work within you...”

Yet, I’d like to suggest we often overlook the importance of the action of the Holy Spirit in these stories and maybe even in our own lives.

Much as a car cannot fulfill its purpose of providing us with transportation without a fill up, we will not be able to fulfill the purpose that God has for us, even if we are in basically good working order without ourselves being filled up. I’m not talking about gas...I’m talking about the Holy Spirit.

We might be tempted to ask what is the Holy Spirit, but the true question is who is the Holy Spirit? The short answer is the Holy Spirit is God. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, which is one God in three persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

To be honest with you, I have been studying this idea of one God in three persons for a long time and it is still one of those concepts that I have a hard time wrapping my mind around. But I think the basic principle is that God is relational.

Right from the beginning of Scripture we begin to see a picture of a God that is communal in nature. In Genesis 1:26 it says, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness....’”

Our triune God, one God in three persons, while a sometimes difficult concept for us to grasp, shows us that relationship is God’s primary way of being. There is an intimate relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and God desires an intimate relationship with us.

The Holy Spirit has come to bring us into just such a relationship.

The Holy Spirit is God’s presence in the world and God’s presence in the church sustaining and empowering believers as they seek to fulfill their purpose as it is made known to them by God.

I’d like to share an experience (actually several) about the Holy Spirit’s work in the church:

One of my joys in ministry has been to be a part of Volunteer in Mission trips to places like Biloxi, MS; Cedar Rapids, IA; Prattsville, NY; Long Island after Hurricane Sandy and most recently Ecuador.

Here is some of what happens:

People take a week or more of their time, often using precious vacation time leaving behind families and job responsibilities to answer the call, "Whom can I send?" by responding "Here am I, send me."

Many travel at personal expense to get there. They go not necessarily knowing what they will be asked to do. They do so in response to Jesus' invitation to "follow me."

Many different people, some from different churches, come together one day and by week's end there is one church, one body, one fellowship, one community.

During their time together, besides the physical work that was done hammering nails, brushing paint, laying tile, making meals, washing clothes, climbing ladders we experienced and heard stories of the ministry of presence. Standing in lines at stores buying supplies we were welcomed and thanked for being the church (the body of Christ) amongst a people in need.

We heard from people in the communities where we worked how the church's presence brought them and many others hope, when there only seemed to be despair.

We saw lives within our team transformed and renewed by this experience.

What is it that the Holy Spirit did during this time?

1. The Holy Spirit empowered believers. Persons were empowered to believe that they could make a difference in the world with the gifts that God had given them. They were empowered to believe that God would choose them to do his work in the world.
2. The Holy Spirit called a church into being. Often there were many different congregations brought together, but through the work of the Holy Spirit we became one church. There was unity amid the diversity that was forged by the Holy Spirit reminding us of our commitment to Christ not a commitment to a particular church or congregation.
3. The Holy Spirit empowered the work of the church to be a powerful witness of the grace of God among a people that may very well have been feeling as though God had abandoned them.
4. The Holy Spirit confirmed in the hearts of many the church's call to be in mission in the world.

What was happening during these weeks is that individuals were using the gifts that they had received through the Holy Spirit.

According to some counts, there are up to 20 gifts that the Holy Spirit may give to believers including the gifts of: prophecy, servanthood, wisdom, knowledge, administration, apostleship, shepherding, faith, miracles, leadership, giving, compassion, healing, discernment, teaching, helping, evangelism, exhortation, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

The story in Acts shares that the Holy Spirit gave those who were baptized the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues.

These gifts of the Holy Spirit are for the building up of the church. They are received that we might serve others. They are part of the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

When we look around with open hearts and minds we can see many ways that God is a real presence in this world that we inhabit, and that presence is what we come to know as the Holy Spirit.

This Holy Spirit is not something to be feared, but to be welcomed, to be invited into our lives so we might fulfill the purpose that God has for us – as individuals and as his church.

This leads me to another question, “How do we get filled up with the Holy Spirit? How do we receive this Holy Spirit power to fulfill our purpose as ministers of the gospel, witnesses to the Word of God, traffickers of grace, hope for the hopeless, liberators of the oppressed, comforters of the distressed and more?”

In the 4th chapter of Acts it says that as Peter and John were gathered with a group of friends and “while they were praying, the place where they were meeting trembled and shook. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God’s Word with fearless confidence.”

The best way to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be filled with power from above, is to ask...to pray for it. Ask others to pray for you, that you might be filled with the Holy Spirit. And keep praying for it.

(If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Luke 11:13)

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is like a balloon. You can be more and more filled with the Spirit just as a balloon can be filled more and more.

But sometimes when we fill up a balloon and tie it off, we find the next day it is no longer as full as the day before. Somehow the air leaked out.

D.L. Moody was once asked why he prayed to be filled by the Holy Spirit over and over again. Wasn’t once good enough? His response was, “I leak.”

How do we know we are being filled and it hasn’t all leaked out?

Well, I’m going to make a hard turn here, but hopefully by the end you’ll see where I’m going...Do we have any golfers here this morning?

I like to golf – which is always an easy thing to say when you’re not actually engaged in it – and have experienced my share of frustrations while chasing that little white ball around the green pastures.

I’d like to share with you my most memorable golfing experience. When I was in college, playing at the East Mountain Golf course in Waterbury, on the 17th hole, 177 yards, hitting a 7-iron I made a hole-in-one...that wasn’t it.

Actually it was the time I was playing in a church outing when I was a marginal member of the church. I had a lot of head knowledge of God and Jesus, but not a lot of heart knowledge.

I was playing in the foursome with the pastor – Pastor Dick – and I learned something very quickly about Pastor Dick, he was not a very good golfer. Right out of the first tee box it seems as if he thought the fairway was something one was supposed to avoid. Each shot seemed to go deeper and deeper into the woods. And I knew that if I was in Pastor Dick’s golf shoes I would be inching closer and closer to a meltdown and soon golf clubs would be raining down all over that first fairway.

Two things about the name of Jesus and golf. You here his name a lot on the golf course, usually under two circumstances:

1. You hit a bad shot that goes bad and stays bad. That is often followed by Jesus name being uttered in some kind of guttural tone, sometimes under your breath, sometimes screamed for all to here.
2. You hit a bad shot that miraculously turns out good. It bounces off the tree and on to the green or skips three times across the pond and lands safely on the other side. In this case the shot is often followed by “Thank You, Jesus.” The other frequently uttered words are, “I meant to do that.”

Under no circumstances, however, do you here “Thank You, Jesus” after the shot that goes bad and stays bad.

That is, unless, you're Pastor Dick. As I watched him play lumberjack more than Jack Nicklaus I could hear these words after each shot took him deeper and deeper into the forest primeval: "Thank You, Jesus." "Thank You, Lord."

And he meant it. He wasn't being sarcastic. He was so filled with joy and no lousy game of golf was going to take that away from him.

As I watched him that day, and as I continued to watch him in church on Sunday, working with the youth group, and other activities I saw a life that was transformed into something that I didn't see in a lot of other people I knew at the time.

The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

It was obvious to me that the Holy Spirit was at work in Pastor Dick's life as evidenced by the fruit that he was bearing. And from that day on the golf course I knew this was something I wanted to be a part of my life – this Holy Spirit that was so richly blessing Pastor Dick.

A life filled with the Holy Spirit is an empowered life, it is a gifted life, it is a directed life, it is a life that bears good fruit.

But it is a life we need to seek after. It is a life we need to pray for again and again, because we leak.

And I saw that need all too clearly this past week in our Nation's Capital. While not the first time, it seemed to me most glaring that we have leaked our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

As the images from what occurred at our Capital this past Wednesday continue to haunt me, I am certain that we as a people, as a nation, need a fresh outpouring and filling of the Holy Spirit.

We need to be empowered to be more like Jesus. To, in the words of Paul, "look not to our own interests, but the interests of others."

We need to discover our gifts of the Spirit to build up the church and transform the world.

We need to bear the fruits of the Spirit in such a way that others will see in us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God in us and in turn want that in their life as well.

We need a fresh outpouring and filling of the Holy Spirit. I need it. Our church needs it. Our nation needs it. And we need it now.

May it be so.