

Gen. 1: 1-5; Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11
Olivet Church, Charlottesville, January 7, 2018

Baptized in the Spirit

The story we have read from the book of Acts is at the center of disagreement among Christians as to whether water baptism and baptism in the Spirit are separate events. Our Pentecostal brothers and sisters claim that a second baptism of the Spirit is necessary; and is evidenced by the manifestation of the more sensational spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues.

Actually there is an account earlier in the book of Acts where the baptism of the Spirit precedes the baptism of water. Peter was sharing the gospel with Gentiles in Cornelius' household and the Spirit of God fell on them; after which the apostle decided that they should be baptized.

But the fundamental understanding of the Spirit's relationship to baptism is put forth in Acts, chapter 2, when the crowds who had gathered on Pentecost responded to Peter's message asking, "What should we do?" And Peter responded, "Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sin may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

In other words, the anointing of the Spirit is not optional or separate but rather integral to baptism. In our baptisms we acknowledge our sinfulness and need of God's salvation and receive God's cleansing and forgiveness. But in our baptisms we also enter into a new life by the Spirit of God.

It may not be quite so apparent in our sprinkling style of baptisms. But it is very clear in an immersion baptism; that through baptism we die to the old self and are reborn into a new life that we have in Jesus Christ. By "water and the Spirit" Jesus says we are born anew, born from above, born again into a life that misfortune, tragedy, terrorists acts, cancer, aging, and death cannot diminish or destroy.

"Do you not know," the Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 6, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life."

Though totally befuddled by his encounter with Jesus recorded in John chapter 3, Nicodemus was nonetheless correct in stating that "no one can be born again after growing old; no one can reenter their mother's womb and have a new life." It is only by the work of the Spirit of God Jesus says, that we have this new life; that the mortal, weak, and perishable can put on immortality, power, and glory.

So I do not think Paul's action recorded in our reading from Acts speaks of a second baptism of the Spirit. Rather it simply affirms the fundamental belief that God is at work in our baptisms and the Spirit of God is received in our baptism. The Holy Spirit is not optional, not an accessory for Christians.

None of us would be here today without the prompting, prodding, whispering power of the Spirit. Jesus told Simon Peter that it was only the work of the Spirit of God that enabled him to acknowledge Jesus as Son of God and Savior. "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you," he said. Paul tells us in Galatians, as well as in Romans, that it is the Spirit working in us that enables us to call God "father;" to trust that we are now in an intimate relationship with our Maker like that of a child to a parent. Our affirmation of faith does not lie at the end of our human reasoning, but rather through the Spirit's warming and stirring of our hearts and minds.

Jesus told his followers that they would receive the Spirit; he would send the advocate, the comforter; that they would be *clothed with power from on high*. And we read in Acts chapter 2 of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost enabling his disciples to witness in word and deed to God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

Our new life in Christ does not begin at our death. It begins at our baptisms and is completed at our deaths when the old, self-centered, mortal self that we died to in baptism is extinguished... but the new life we are given in Christ is present in complete, undiminished, brilliant glory. Martin Luther often noted, "baptism is a lifelong process of conversion and nurture which begins at the font and does not end until death, until we are at last tucked safely into the everlasting arms of the God who first reached for us in baptism."

None of us could survive as a Christian were it not for the daily, subtle but essential support of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not some exotic phenomenon. It is nothing less than our daily experience of the near presence of God in our lives. It is nothing less than the power, the sphere of influence, that we yield our lives to as we walk with God through life, live out our faith, embrace our ministry and bear the fruit of the Spirit of God of love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

For a lot of us the beginning of the year is marked by resolving to live new lives according to new habits. There is a kind of confession that begins the New Year because in the making of resolutions we are in effect admitting that we have not been the kind of people we should be... not as thankful, cheerful, healthy, slender, productive, and forgiving as we would like to be. But when the weeks speed by and ordinary life resumes, old habits tend to reassert themselves. Perhaps our resolution making is a bit like John's baptism of repentance. John's baptism had to do with reversing the direction of one's life, seeking forgiveness, resolving to do and be better. But John spoke of the temporary, preparatory nature of this work. One was coming who would baptize with something greater than water --- the very Spirit of God Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.

At Jesus' baptism the heavens were torn apart, the veil between God's space and our space was removed, the barrier between heaven and earth taken away. No longer is God sitting on a throne in the distant heavens. God comes to dwell among us. God is with us, God is on the loose in our realm swooping into our world like a dove. The same Spirit that moved across the formless void at creation now tears open the heavens and descends in Christ to redeem, save, rescue, remake this creation. Humanity's relationship with God is transformed. The words are proclaimed, "you are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." And the Spirit is given, enabling us to believe those words and live accordingly.