

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD YEAR B

PREACHED SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXT: Mark 1.4-11; Acts 19.1-7; Genesis 1.1-5; Psalm 29

In our second lesson today from the book of Acts, we find Paul talking with some followers. Somehow, these apostles have missed hearing anything about the Holy Spirit – which doesn't say much for the thousands that were present on the day of Pentecost. Anyway, Paul decides to baptize *them* "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (let's forget about the fact that this would be a second baptism for them), and amazing things happen: *"When Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied – altogether there were about twelve of them."*

Contrast that scene with the one in our gospel reading, when Jesus is baptized. As Mark writes, *"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"*

What is striking about Jesus' baptism is the fact that he is rather passive in all that happens. But perhaps that's just the way it should be. After all, this is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, his first appearance in the gospel of Mark. In Mark, Jesus has no birth narrative, no back story and no pedigree. His baptism is his first public appearance. It is God's "adoption" of Jesus, and the start of Jesus' long and difficult journey toward Jerusalem and the cross.

At his baptism, Jesus doesn't have to do anything, but rather simply receives the gift of the Holy Spirit and of God's favor. Here, God offers powerful words of acceptance, identity, blessing, and commitment: *"You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."* Does Jesus need to hear these words of affirmation from his father? True, he doesn't need forgiveness. But to know who he is, to hear that he is accepted, loved, pleasing to God - to be told in no uncertain terms that he is the Son of God - must surely have been powerful words, ones that shaped not only that day but also his entire ministry. Jesus' baptism gives him the positive assurances that he would need during his temptation in the wilderness, through the years of his ministry, and in his suffering and death.

And here, perhaps, is the connection to our own baptism as well as and a reminder of why that event matters so much. Just like Jesus, we all long to hear words of acceptance, identity, blessing, and commitment. And that's precisely the gift of Baptism! We do not have to do anything to receive God's promises. Indeed, the beauty of infant Baptism (which we Lutherans embrace) is that you can't do anything – not even make a decision for Jesus, let alone commit your life. Rather, just like Jesus we are passive recipients of God's blessing and favor. We are called God's beloved children not because of something we do but because of who God is – a loving parent who wants nothing more than to see us flourish.

In Holy Baptism, God just chooses us. God says that we are enough, that we are pleasing to God and deserve to be loved. God sees us not as we are in ourselves but as we are in Jesus Christ.

Lutherans also believe that in baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and that God claims and names us. We receive a new identity as children of God and followers of Christ. We are marked with the sign of the cross, and even though life continues right along, we are forever changed. Living into that change - well, that takes a lifetime and is a process rather than a destination.

Unlike the disciples from Ephesus that Paul encounters, most of us have at least heard of the Holy Spirit, even if we're not too sure what this gift-that-keeps-on-giving is really all about. As I mentioned earlier, once these Ephesian disciples are baptized properly in Jesus' name and Paul lays hands on them, the Holy Spirit is activated in them, and they're off and prophesying. Would that it were so easy for each of us!

We Lutherans don't often talk about the Holy Spirit, but it is that Spirit, that constant presence of God in our lives, which helps us to handle all the challenges we face. From problems at home or in the community to concerns about the world or our personal lives, we can face whatever might be plaguing us with confidence knowing that God is on our side.

Yesterday at our retreat, members of our Congregation Council spent a great deal of time talking about our church and its future. We came to the common conclusion that we need to start focusing our energies on evangelism - sharing the Good News of Christ not only with those in the community who are unchurched, but reminding our own members of this Good News.

If the Holy Spirit "came over" first century believers and actually sort of "dive bombed" into Jesus' head, what's to stop that same Spirit from activating us in fresh and out-of-the-box ways, like evangelism? Perhaps only our own stubborn wills and desire to be in control?

In a few minutes I will ask the members of our Congregation Council to say yes to the responsibilities of which they have been elected this year. I will also ask each of you to make vows to continue to live faithfully as disciples of Christ. Together, as God's beloved people, as Christ's body here on earth, we are sent to wade into the world's troubled waters, emboldened by the Holy Spirit to love and serve our neighbors. Let's make this the year to be all in and to go forth boldly and faithfully - not only for the sake of Zion but for the entirety of God's kingdom. It's bound to be quite a ride with the Holy Spirit on the loose!