

Sermon: January 10, 2010 BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7; Ps. 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Title: Baptism: The Seal of the Holy Spirit

Call to Worship:

Psalm 29: 1-4, 10-11

Give unto the Lord, O you mighty ones,

Give unto the Lord glory and strength.

Give unto the Lord the glory due to His name.

Worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness.

The voice of the Lord is over the waters,

The God of Glory thunders; The Lord is over many waters

The voice of the Lord is powerful;

The voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood,

And the Lord sits as King forever.

The Lord will give strength to His people;

The Lord will bless His people with peace.

Hymns: #1

#2

#3

Corporate Prayer of Confession:

Eternal God, you created the heavens and brought forth this earth to be our dwelling place. We confess before you that we have been poor stewards of Your creation. We have used up resources without considering the effects of our consumption on future generations. We have misused resources in such a way that future generations will be limited in their enjoyment of Your creation. Forgive us, Creator God, for not using our creativity to find alternative sources of energy. And forgive us when we continue in our wayward ways even when the signs of the times tell us that Your creation is being threatened. We pray that you will enlighten us with Your wisdom and enable us to see beyond our selfish desires. Remind us on a daily basis that we do not own the earth, but are simply stewards of all that you created.

We pray in the holy name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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Title: Baptism: The Seal of the Holy Spirit

Well, it happens every year on the second Sunday in January. We celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. It is an event in the life of Jesus that marks the transition of Jesus from a simple carpenter in Nazareth to the God/Man who came to bring new life to God's people. From the moment of Jesus' baptism his life and mission begins to emerge. It is a significant event, in that it models for you and me the kind of transition that we need to go through when God's call is laid on us.

We in the Protestant Reformed Tradition consider Baptism one of the two Sacraments which Christ established as an outward sign of His becoming One with us and we with Him. To quote the Westminster Catechism: What is a Sacrament? A Sacrament is an outward sign of an inward Grace. The Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, of course, being the other Sacrament which the Reformers, Calvin, Zwingli and Luther identified as essential to the Biblical integrity of The Church.

Now, we can argue till we are blue in the face with our brothers and sisters in the Baptist Church and the Disciples of Christ Church about the means of being Baptized. As Presbyterians we practice the simple act of sprinkling water over the head of the one coming for Baptism. We say that

it is not the method, but the symbolism that matters. It is the simple act of “being washed” and the commitment to the transformative power of Christ that matters. In the case of babies, the Baptismal Act is a commitment which Christian Parents take in behalf of their children. And then this claiming of baptism for their child is followed up with years of caring and nurturing that child in the ways of Christ, so that, at the appropriate time those children will be able to reaffirm their baptism and personally accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. So, Baptism is not some magical hocus-pocus that the minister sprinkles over the head and “ZAP” a new Christian is made. Baptism is a sign and a seal of the fact that God has chosen this person, be they an adult, a teenager or a little baby.

Dr. George Jackson was my pastor as a teenager in Winchester. He had served with distinction as a chaplain in the United States Navy during WWII. He did not speak much about his experiences in the Pacific, but when he did, he would tell of meeting with young men who knew that with the coming sunrise, they would be storming a beach on some distant island. Young men who knew that there was a pretty good possibility that they would not make it across the beach. And almost always, in those dark nights before the battle, they talked about their faith and what it meant to know that they had been baptized into the fellowship of believers. That no matter what happened the next day, they were among God’s faithful. And then Dr. George would tell of a number of marines who had never been a part of the Church, who had never been Baptized. And they all asked if they could receive the sacrament. Dr. George finished his earthly journey a number of years ago, but I wish I had a record of the number of young men he

baptized on board ship, or in some fox hole, or in the hospital after the battle. I suspect it would be a monstrous list.

From the time that John came out of the wilderness, baptizing and proclaiming the coming of God's anointed, to the day when the early church gathered in caves and basements to worship, Baptism has been an essential part of the believer's experience. Jesus found it absolutely essential that he go out to the wilderness and receive the Baptism of John. Even in the face of John's reluctance, Jesus claimed this transformative washing which John offered.

Think about it. Almost every time God intervened in the life of his people it is marked by the passing through water. The flight from Egypt required that they pass through the waters of the Red Sea. Even the story of Noah is a story of God cleansing of the earth with water. And when the Hebrew Children finally reach the promised land, it was necessary for them to once more pass through the waters of the Jordan. The scriptures are filled with illusions to water as the means by which things change. You pass through the waters of the Red Sea and you are no longer slaves. You are a free and independent people. You pass through the waters of the Jordan, you are no longer a wandering tribe, you are a people with a land. You pass through the waters of baptism and you are no longer a disconnected individual, you are a child of God, claimed by God and nurtured by God's people.

I think I've told this story before, but I'll tell it again. A few years back I was pastoring Sandy Ridge Presbyterian

Church in Sandy Ridge, NC. Now for those of you who don't know where Sandy Ridge is, the best I say is to drive south from Martinsville, VA on US220, and about 150 yards after you cross the state line into North Carolina, turn right, go past the Price United Methodist Church, cross the railroad track on the new bridge they just completed, continue for about five miles till you cross over the Mayo River, and then go about 10 more miles. You will find yourself in Sandy Ridge, NC. The church consisted of farmers, and sawmill workers. And one Sunday we were celebrating communion. The crowd was so small that I invited everyone up front to partake of the elements. Everyone came except for this dear lady who had been worshiping there for longer than I had been there as pastor. She sat in her pew. After the service I went over and sat with her and I asked if something was wrong. I noticed that she did not take communion. She broke into tears. "I just couldn't come up," she said. "I've never publically accepted Christ as my savior. I've never been baptized." And with that she broke into tears. I let her cry it out and then I asked. "Is that something you would like to do?" And her face broke into one of the biggest smiles I have ever seen. "Oh yes, Oh yes!" And that very next Sunday I called a special Session meeting and we met with this dear lady and at worship that morning she received the sacrament of baptism. Now, she wasn't a bad lady. She had lived a fine life, raised three children and cared for her sick husband. But after she received the sacrament of Baptism she was transformed. She took a more active role in church affairs. She almost always smiled. She brought a neighbor with her to Church most Sundays. Baptism did not change her. The Christ that she experienced in her Baptism made the difference.

Now, jump with me to the time when the Church was young. Christians were popping up in lots of strange places. The Apostles remained in and around Jerusalem, but word got out. Up in the territory known as Samaria, the Word of God in Christ Jesus had been heard. And a group of believers kind of spontaneously emerged. And word of this outbreak of faith reached the Disciples in Jerusalem they were skeptical. They sent Peter and John to check it out. I just love this story!

Suppose we got word that there was a group of folks over in Hurt who were meeting for worship and study and they called themselves Presbyterians. So, we sent Sang il Lee and John Erb over to check them out. I mean, we wouldn't want anyone calling themselves Presbyterians who didn't follow Presbyterian Doctrine, would we. Besides we might say to ourselves, "That's not how it works. We have a process. We must follow the Book of Order. Presbytery has to establish a church." So we go and check it out. Right? We go by the Book!

So, Peter and John went, and what they found were a group of believers who had heard about Jesus. But Peter and John perceived that there was something missing from the Baptism they practiced. There was no transformative power in their faith. They formed a group of believers, they practiced Baptism and they acknowledge Jesus. But something was missing. It was the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. I guess Peter and John did not see that their faith, their baptism, their acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord made any difference in their lives. So, Peter and John prayed with them and laid hands on them and immediately

the transformation took place. I wish Luke would have described a little better what it meant for these Samaritan Christians to receive the Holy Spirit. Did they hoot and holler? Did they dance around and roll in the dirt? Did they speak in tongues and make funny sounds? We just do not know, because Luke does not tell us. But he does tell us that whatever transformation took place it was noticeable to one person. A man named Simon saw it all happen. And he thought to himself, "I've got to have that kind of power." So he offered to pay Peter and John to give him that power. Well, you know what Peter and John thought of that. Simon is rebuked and asks for forgiveness. But the thing to remember is that before Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritan Christians, their faith did not inspire Simon to want to buy it. After those young Christians had received the Holy Spirit, such a transformation took place that Simon would have paid big bucks for this kind of authority and power. Remember now, what he wanted was not The Holy Spirit, but the power to lay on hands and give others the Holy Spirit.

We have here this morning a fine group of Baptized Christians. The question we ought to be asking ourselves is this: "Does the fact that we have received the sacrament of Baptism make any difference in our lives?" Could someone come into this fellowship of believers and feel the power of the Holy Spirit at work among us? Is there anything going on in this Church that would cause someone to offer to pay us big money to get some of it?

The point is, you cannot buy The Holy Spirit. But you sure can give it away. So this is the morning that we are called upon to remember Christ's Baptism and the transformation

that took place in his life. And it is a time to remember our own baptisms and the transformation that is even now taking place in our lives individually and as a fellowship of Faith. Amen.

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