January 13, 2013

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Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, in our tradition, it's the feast day of the Baptism of our Lord. This is one of the four standard baptismal feasts in the Episcopal Church, or in other words, days where it's especially appropriate to hold baptisms. The others are Pentecost, the Great Vigil of Easter, and All Saints' Day, although in truth it's okay to hold baptisms on almost any Sunday and especially during the Bishop's visit.

And both the Gospel and the New Testament reading support the idea that today is about baptism. But if that were all there was to them, then this would be a very short sermon (which isn't always a BAD thing).

But let's start with baptism. The story of Jesus' baptism appears in all four Gospels, mostly the same but with some fairly striking differences.

In Matthew, John baptizes Jesus under protest that Jesus should be the one doing the baptizing, but is convinced by Jesus that it is necessary to "fulfill all righteousness" (a very Jewish idea); The Spirit of God descends like a dove and a voice from heaven proclaims ABOUT Jesus, "this is my beloved Son with whom I'm well pleased." The Gospel doesn't say specifically, but presumably other people could hear the voice, too.

In Mark, John baptizes Jesus without comment, having talked about him before to the crowds. The Spirit again descends like a dove, as in Matthew, but in Mark the voice says TO Jesus, "you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Since Mark is the oldest of the Gospels, we might assume the change in wording was Matthew's idea.

In Luke – today's Gospel reading – there is no John in sight. In the verses that were omitted from the revised common lectionary for today, we find that he had been arrested. Once again, this is a variation on Mark's original. But Jesus is baptized by someone, and while he is praying afterwards, the Holy Spirit descends in a bodily form like a dove and the voice from heaven said TO Jesus, just as in Mark, "you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

In John, Jesus' baptism is narrated to the crowd after the fact, by John the Baptist. In this version, when John sees Jesus, he tells the crowd, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world," hey people, this is the guy I was telling you about. He goes on to tell how he saw the Spirit descend as a dove on Jesus and stay there, but John didn't know who he was until a voice from God told him that whomever he sees the Spirit descend upon and remain is the one who will be baptizing with the Holy Spirit. Then John goes on to say that Jesus is the Son of God, as opposed to the voice from heaven saying it.

Because Jesus' baptism is covered in such detail in all of the Gospels, it is obviously one of the most important events in the Gospel story. Jesus' baptism marks the end of John the Baptist's ministry and the beginning of his own. Luke even goes so far as to shut John up in prison at this point to really make that delineation clear, which doesn't happen until much later in Matthew and Mark, and not at all in John.

But differences in storytelling aside, the common elements are that Jesus was baptized, that he was somehow proclaimed to be the Son of God, and that the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove.

Now let's take a look at our reading from Acts. Once again, we have baptism and the Holy Spirit, but this time they don't come together. There is a delay between when Philip baptizes the Samaritans and when Peter and John show up to pray that they would receive the Holy Spirit.

There are two things to take away from both of these stories together. First, baptism is important. This may seem like an obvious statement, but we need to continuously keep baptism in the forefront of our minds and hearts.

Second, the Holy Spirit is important. Once again, a no-brainer, but I think that sometimes the Holy Spirit gets put in the "isn't that nice, dear" category and ignored.

In the book of Acts, on either side of our reading today, there was another person besides Philip performing miracles - a magician named Simon. After he saw what Philip was doing and heard him preach the good news, he too became a believer and started following Philip around. He was even baptized. But when Peter and John had laid hands on the Samaritans and they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, Simon told them that he wanted that power too, and would give them money for it. Needless to say, this didn't go over well. The Holy Spirit is not a commodity to be bought or sold and the Holy Spirit is not something to be taken for granted.

Over the millennia there has been plenty, PLENTY of discussion, scholarship, and argument over the juxtaposition between Holy Baptism and the Holy Spirit. The Bible is all over the place. Very often, the Holy Spirit is received at the time of baptism, in the manner of Jesus' baptism. But there are also stories where the Holy Spirit came first, or where it doesn't say whether the Holy Spirit was there at all.

In the early Church, it was felt that the Holy Spirit came with the anointing by the Bishop after baptism. This then evolved into Confirmation, and which is seen by some denominations as the completion of the giving of the Holy Spirit that was started at baptism.

The Pentecostals and Charismatics see receiving the Spirit as something separate from the regeneration of baptism, and that it empowers them with the Gifts of the Spirit for ministry.

We Episcopalians have been on the fence about it. Prior to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, confirmation was seen as a necessary adjunct to Holy Baptism, with the anointing by the Bishop somehow completing the process of conferring the Holy Spirit.

But with the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, after much scholarship and prayer, it was considered theologically more sound that Holy Baptism was full initiation into the Body of Christ, complete with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This left the Sacrament of Confirmation a bit adrift, but that's a topic for another sermon.

What all this, the Bible, the scholarship, the doctrine, says to us is that a) the Holy Spirit is important, which we already knew, and b) we don't control it. No matter what, the Holy Spirit is out of our control. Just as Simon couldn't buy the Spirit, we can't determine when and where the holy dove will land.

Which brings me to yet another element to take into consideration here. When Jesus is baptized in Luke, the Holy Spirit descends AS HE IS PRAYING. And in Acts, Peter and John PRAY for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be conferred on the Samaritans.

So there's a third important thing – prayer. Whenever we hope that the Holy Spirit will come down and fill someone or something, we express that hope in prayer. In baptism we say a prayer over the water: "Now sanctify the water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior."

The whole Great Thanksgiving in the Eucharist is one long prayer, and in the middle we say, "We pray you, gracious God, to send your Holy Spirit upon these gifts that they may be the Sacrament of the Body of Christ and his Blood of the new Covenant."

In the early Church, baptism was not separate from Holy Eucharist. After being baptized, usually on the Great Vigil of Easter, the new members of Christ's Body immediately received the sacrament of his Body and Blood. And as a repeatable sacrament, unlike Baptism which is not repeatable, Holy Eucharist is meant to be a renewal of that initial baptism/communion event and a strengthening of our spirits by the Holy Spirit to go out into the world to preach the Gospel.

Four important elements! So these are the four key things to think about today: Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit, Prayer and Holy Eucharist. Rats, now I've got Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition going through my head!

All of these things are absolutely indispensable in our life in Christ. We can't take communion without thinking of our baptism – either we're renewing our baptismal vows or proclaiming our belief in one baptism by saying the Nicene Creed.

We can't think of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives without prayer, just as the apostles were praying in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. And Holy Baptism is inseparable from both the Holy Spirit and from prayer, and should be inseparable from Holy Eucharist.

Of those four things, prayer and communion are most necessary for us to do on a regular basis. Holy Baptism happens only once, and the Holy Spirit is not under our control. But if we habitually turn to God in prayer and join with our community in Holy Eucharist, or in other words, "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers," we are both fulfilling our baptismal covenant and giving the Holy Spirit room to work.

And there is so much work to be done.

Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and courageous and ever enjoy Her consolations.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.