The Spirit of Baptism

Mark 1:4-11 Kimby Young

Acts 19:1-7 January 14, 2018

The first Sunday after Epiphany is designated by the greater church as “Baptism of our Lord Sunday.” The assigned lectionary scripture passage is always the story from one of the gospels of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist. It is a Sunday set aside to think about the sacrament of Baptism and to remember our own Baptisms. We do not have a baptism today, so this is a time to think about the meaning of baptism in general – not tied to a specific child of God, but connected to all of us everywhere. This Sunday is a time to renew our Baptismal promises to God and to one another, and a time to remember God’s promises to us lived out in so many ways.

As I was reading the scripture from the gospel for today, the last words of John struck me as important, in verse 8 – I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Then in the reading from Acts, Paul talks about different kinds of baptisms. John’s baptism and the baptism of the Spirit. I started thinking about the core meaning of our baptism in Jesus Christ. What is it we are doing and why? There is the action, the ritual which we do up here – with water and words and traditions. Then there is the action of redemption in Christ, the movement in our hearts, which may or may not happen at the same time as the ritual sacrament. There is the physical experience and the spiritual experience of God’s grace. The physical experience is intended to mirror the spiritual gift of God. But sometimes that gift of God comes even without water and the proper words.

I get asked about baptism a lot. It is one of the many things that divides Christians along denominational lines. That is ironic since the core meaning of baptism is about unity in Christ, belonging to God, and connecting with others in one true fellowship. Yet we frail and fallen humans bicker over the “right” way to do a baptism. For Presbyterians there is no one correct way to baptize. We commonly use sprinkling – with just a little water. But we will use immersion or pouring if the circumstance is right. We don’t believe the method used is as important as the meaning of the commitments being made. Immersion is a much richer symbol, a vivid demonstration of the death and resurrection of all who would follow Jesus. For practical purposes we use less water to convey the same meaning.

The other dispute is the age of baptism. Should we baptize children the minute they are born? Or should we wait until the person is old enough to make the commitment for themselves? The answer is either choice is correct. The answer is in the emphasis of what we believe is happening in baptism, and in salvation. Is it God’s love that saves us, or is it our choice that saves us? Think about that. Is it God’s love that saves us, or is it our choice that saves us? Those who wait for baptism until the age of consent emphasize our human commitment to follow Jesus. Those who allow baptism of babies emphasize that salvation is through God’s power and God’s power alone. It is God’s grace that saves us, not our own decisions. In the Presbyterian tradition we lean toward the emphasis on God’s action. We baptize children who are vulnerable and trusting and innocent in order to emphasize that salvation is not about our action or our personal decisions, or our own worthiness or willingness. Salvation is about God’s action in Jesus Christ, God’s grace totally undeserved, God’s love poured out to all of us. In our tradition Baptism is all about God. We are as helpless as babies to save ourselves. It is God’s grace that gives us power to grow and to live and to act as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world. So, yes, we baptize babies, or children, or youth, or adults. And whenever we baptize we remember that even as adults we must come to Christ as a trusting, powerless, vulnerable and open child. We must place our lives in God’s hands and trust God to carry us wherever we need to go.

We also acknowledge in our tradition that we don’t do it alone. We always baptize in community, in a worship setting, to remind ourselves that not only does it “take a village to raise a child” – it takes a community of believers gathered to help us be the best disciples we can be, to help us live our faith fully and truly, to help us see, feel and understand God with us. It takes a community and our community needs each of us to be the best church we can be. In our baptisms, not only will the parents make a commitment, or the person being baptized will make a commitment to trust God, but the entire congregation will make promises to support the person being baptized – to show them love and to teach them how to be faithful to God.

A baptism in our church today is about commitment and belonging. We declare publicly and demonstrate symbolically that we belong to God. But it is not the ritual of baptism that makes us belong. It is not the act of pouring water or being immersed in water that saves us and connects us to God in Jesus Christ. The important element of baptism, the core of its meaning, is something undefined and indescribable, something we cannot measure or contain, something we cannot produce on our own. It is God’s grace that saves us. It is God’s Spirit that transforms us. And that grace can come any way God wants to send it. In baptism in the middle of a community, or on a hillside or an empty room. God’s Spirit can come to you anywhere, any time. That Spirit of God enters our lives with or without the water and the words. The Spirit of God surrounds each child at birth and walks with that child every day of our lives. Our sacrament of Baptism is just acknowledging that holiness, leaning into that holiness, as gift of our loving God. It is not necessary to be baptized with water to enter the kingdom of heaven. We don’t have to be baptized in a church in order to belong to God, to be loved by God. Baptism is simply a tool of the church to remind us of that belonging in the Spirit which God has already freely given. Baptism reminds us of God’s love for us, it doesn’t create that love. That love of God for you has existed from the beginning of time, and will exist for all eternity. You belong to God.

So back to the scripture for today. We know how to be baptized into a church. We know about the sacrament with water. How is it that we are baptized in the Holy Spirit? How is it that we are able, like Jesus in the gospel, to see God coming to us – descending like a dove, to hear God blessing us, to experience God loving us? How can we be baptized in God’s Holy Spirit? That is not as easy to explain as water baptism, or as easy to guarantee. A few clues are found in the scripture for today.

To be baptized in God’s Holy Spirit is about being humble like John who said I am not worthy even to touch Jesus feet. Remember, our belonging to God, our gift of salvation, our reception of the Holy Spirit, is not about us. And it’s not about the right church or the right method. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is about God. It’s not about how worthy or how wonderful or how hard working or pious or good or holy we are. It’s about how worthy and wonderful and holy and incomprehensibly loving God is. Being baptized in the Spirit is about God’s power, not our own. So we can’t control it. We can’t arrange it. We can only receive it and by grace pass it on.

To be baptized in God’s Holy Spirit is about being willing and open, like Jesus, who did not have to be obedient to God, but chose to come to earth, to serve God, to teach and touch humanity, to live generously and joyfully, and to love as only God can love. The human Jesus was willing and so the Spirit of God filled Jesus completely. If we are willing, God will use us in remarkable miraculous ways to touch humanity and to heal the wounds of the world. If we are willing, God’s Holy Spirit will baptize us into belonging in Christ, and make us able to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination and love to the glory of God.

Which leads to the third observation from today’s scripture. In the lesson from Acts, immediately after being baptized in the Holy Spirit, the people began speaking in tongues and prophesying – that is they began revealing God to the world. While we may not be able to explain or initiate baptism in the Holy Spirit, if we are so gifted by God, there will be evidence of God’s Spirit moving among us. We will share our gifts. Prophesying in the story from acts. Teaching, sharing, healing, loving, giving, caring, praying, singing, serving – whatever you do - sharing the gifts that God has given us freely and fully, generously and joyfully. We all have gifts to share. If we are baptized in the Holy Spirit we will share those gifts for the common good. Since we are baptized in the Holy Spirit we MUST use our gifts to serve God faithfully. Since you have received the Holy Spirit of God, people will look at you and they will see God in what you do and say. Since you have received the Holy Spirit, you will reflect God’s glory and live as Christ’s disciple. Since you have been baptized by the Holy Spirit of God, your sins are forgiven, and you are set free to be all that God has created you to be. Believe it children of God. And hear God’s blessing to you – you are God’s beloved, whom God loves, with you God is well pleased. Amen.