

John the Baptist has been preparing the people for Jesus' ministry. He has been telling them they will be judged for their behavior, for their ethics and their way of living. They must repent. They must change their ways. They must align what they say, do and think with God's call for mercy and compassion. To that end they are not to take from others what is not theirs to take. They must give up being greedy. They are not to be in competition with their neighbors. And they must share with those in need. He tells them change is necessary if they are to be ready for the coming of the Messiah.

John's words are so powerful and so moving the people began to wonder if he is the Messiah. The Jewish people had been waiting and praying for a savior to come, to redeem Israel for over 200 hundred years. But John is clear he is not the one they are hoping for. Even though he has a most important message he sees himself as being so lowly that he does not even deserve to touch the sandals of the one who is coming. At the time, cleaning the feet of a guest, removing sandals of a guest, was a job left only for the lowliest of slaves. John reinforces his message by saying his baptism is of water and repentance, a turning around, moving into a new way of living and being that opens the heart and mind to living with hesed – that is with charity and loving kindness rather than living for personal gain.

John also reveals Jesus will be offering a different kind of baptism. Jesus' baptism is one of fire and the Holy Spirit. Jesus' baptism is about a refining like a refiners fire, it is about transformation and empowerment. Baptism of wind and fire sounds ominous, frightening and even painful, as it is something totally outside of our ability to manage. In Alan Culpepper's commentary on Luke's Gospel, he states, "John is pointing to a religious experience that is beyond our control. It arises from our responsiveness to what God is doing among us. Such an experience cannot be channeled or domesticated to our tastes. And so the mystery, God acts among us in ways that defy explanation or institutionalization. Our experience of God is always as Spirit and fire."¹

Spirit and fire is what Jesus experienced. After his baptism, presumably he was just one of the crowd, he enters into a time of prayer. Through prayer he becomes open and receptive to the Holy Spirit, which comes upon him

¹ New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol IX. (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1995) 87

like a dove. And the voice of God is heard affirming exactly who Jesus is. Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved. And God blesses Jesus by saying with you I am well pleased.²

Now there is a debate among biblical scholars as to when Jesus knew what it meant to be God's Beloved Son, when he knew what his mission was and how he was to go about it. Some would say it was when he was a young boy when he stayed behind in the temple to learn and debate with the scribes rather than returning to Nazareth with his family after celebrating Passover in Jerusalem.³ Some believe he only came to know his mission after having spent 40 days in the wilderness sparring with the devil.⁴ Others believe Jesus came to know the fullness of his mission when he was on the mountaintop with James, Peter, and John. It was on the mountain that Jesus radiated light. Where Moses and Elijah made an appearance and the voice of God was heard from the cloud reiterating the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son."⁵ But I believe Jesus came to know his mission with his baptism. A baptism of the Spirit filled him with God's grace and then guided him into the wilderness for a time of trial, a time of testing, a time of mediation, discernment and preparation. For his mission was not an easy one.

In the words of Professor Culpepper, "Jesus could not do what he did without God's empowerment and blessing. He is submitting to God's grace and finding identity in that affirmation."⁶ Baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. So baptism is not only about transformation and empowerment it is also a call to faith and trust in God.

Baptism is a gift given to all who are willing to receive. It is a beginning. It is not a means to an end or an ending. Baptism is a call to ministry, going where the Spirit leads us or calls us. And it requires us to trust God and have faith in God.

Now there may seem to be a conflict with the idea of baptism as a call to ministry and our practice of engaging in infant baptism. How can an infant,

² Luke 3:22

³ Luke 2:41-52

⁴ Luke 4:1-13

⁵ Luke 9:28-36

⁶ New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol IX. 92.

a young child, know they are called by God or have the ability to discern God's call? I think this is a valid question. But with each baptism we do, which we do not do often enough; and with each affirmation of baptism and as we welcome new members, we affirm our determination to be a guiding light, to be messengers of the Spirit in support and care of each child baptized. Through baptism we also affirm our support and care of families so that each child grows up to eventually be able to discern God's call. We are here to help equip each child to come to know God. And so we pray that each child will grow in wisdom and grace and will take the steps to enter into the confirmation process where they claim their baptism as their own. In so doing they accept their call to ministry.

For just as Jesus was baptized in community, a community gathered at the Jordan River to hear John preach, we baptize and support each other in community as well. In community we come to know the Spirit is active and present in the world today. Something Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts affirm over and over again. And so we learn the Spirit is a guiding force for Jesus and the disciples. The Spirit is a guiding and inspiring force for those who seek to know Jesus. The Spirit is a force we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, cannot ignore, try as we might. From the Gospel we learn that while the Spirit is in the world, it is through prayer that we become receptive and open to the presence, power and guidance of the Spirit.

Through scripture we also discover the Holy Spirit has been with us always taking on many forms. The word translated as Spirit is also translated as wind or breath. And so we are reminded of the Spirit hovering over the waters of the deep during creation,⁷ the breath of God, the Spirit, filling Adam bringing him to life,⁸ and of Pentecost when the Spirit came upon the disciples in the form of tongues of fire and wind.⁹

Because of the biblical images presented of the Holy Spirit we often find the Spirit to be nebulous or ethereal. Artists, through the centuries, have struggled to give us a likeness of the Spirit that we can hold onto other than being dove-like, or a breeze blowing through the trees, or a warm breath. So for many it is easy to ignore the Spirit and turn to Jesus or God alone

⁷ Genesis 1:2

⁸ Genesis 2:7

⁹ Acts 2:2-4

rather than consider the Trinity as a whole. But Jesus told us the Spirit is the one who would come after he left the disciples. The Spirit is the one that will help us live into Jesus' teachings.

And so the Spirit is with us, even when we don't want to acknowledge the presence of the Spirit in our lives. The Spirit urges us, encourages us, nudges us, pushes us, and supports us through good times and bad, through each day. Like Jesus, the Spirit comes to us when we pray, when we invite God into our lives each day. And like Jesus, the Spirit calls us to ministry through our baptism.

Now some of you will have trouble with the idea of being called to ministry. For when you think of ministry you think of hours and years of education, reading and study. You think of preaching and pastoral visits. However, being in ministry is about faithful discipleship, sharing the message of the Good News with every breath we take.

And so we remember our baptism to help us step into the ministry we have been called to as individuals and as a community of faith. We remember, "We have been incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new creation. Through baptism we become one with Christ." And we rejoice in the affirmation that the Holy Spirit works within each of us, as we have been born through water and Spirit so that we may be true disciples of Jesus Christ, walking together in the way that leads to life, as we seek to live fully into all God has called us to be. For the Spirit is on the move, in our lives and in the world. Amen