

Sermon

January 11, 2015

Genesis 1:1-5

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **2** Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. **3** And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. **4** God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning--the first day.

Psalm 29

1 Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. **2** Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. **3** The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. **4** The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic. **5** The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. **6** He makes Lebanon leap like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox. **7** The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning. **8** The voice of the LORD shakes the desert; the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh. **9** The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!" **10** The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever. **11** The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.

Acts 19:1-7

1 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples **2** and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." **3** So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. **4** Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." **5** On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. **6** When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. **7** There were about twelve men in all.

Mark 1:4-11

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to

stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." **9** At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **11** And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Often, on the Sunday when we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, we'll hear sermons about why Jesus was baptized. Some pastors take the opportunity to wax theological about whether Jesus needed to be baptized at all while others just gloss over the event and tell us to just accept it as a part of his human condition. At other times, we'll hear pastors philosophize about the necessity of baptism for salvation. Some astute pastors take this chance to talk about the Trinity, one of the few places where God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appear together explicitly in Scripture. Some of that's great, but something that we also need to hear, consistently and clearly, is a reminder that baptism is a gift, and a very particular kind of gift at that.

We celebrate the Baptism of our Lord just a few weeks after we celebrate his birth. In record time, a few decades have passed in the life of Jesus. He's gone from a babe in a manger to a leader of a faith renewal movement. And to all who might listen, John tells of the gift that Jesus brings: a bath in the Holy Spirit.

I love baths. I love water in general. Lakes, pools, hot tubs, playing in puddles, I just love being in water. One of the reasons I knew Radford was the right place was because we're a community built around the waters of the New River. There's something about being doused in water that's cleansing, that's purifying, that's refreshing. Being surrounded in that way means you can't escape the effects of the rejuvenation brought through water's cleansing work.

Baptism has historically been this kind of enlivening event, one where we actively practiced the new life received in baptism. You see, throughout most of the first

thousand years of the church, baptism was a full contact sport. Those ready to be baptized would strip naked and enter the water – either a large font in the church or a large body of water nearby – and then rinse from head to toe. On the other side, they'd receive new clothes, white robes, which is one reason why many worship leaders wear white robes and pastors wear white collars, as a sign of our baptism. This was a life changing even for people, so they'd cast off their old garments for new ones washed in the blood of the Lamb.

All too often in our culture, though, baptism has taken a suspect turn. In mainline protestant denominations, including our own Lutheran traditions, many times baptism comes not as this refreshing new life, but as a family obligation. Many of us have seen this, where a couple who hasn't been to church in the last part of forever has a baby baptized because grandma wanted it so bad or because grandpa was a pastor, and then they never come back again. That nonchalance not the kind of baptismal gift, the kind of new life, that we find at the font. And the flip side is that, in many other traditions, people take baptism so seriously that, rather than a single, transformative event that carries us from death into new life, people decide they need baptism two, or three, or more times! I once read an article from a former pastor who'd been baptized seven times. Seven! All because he felt as though he didn't take it seriously enough, because he didn't do enough good with the last baptism.

Neither of those baptisms, whether of obligation or of obsession, are a gift. Today we read Genesis 1, which despite the mention of water seems a strange scripture for the Sunday of Christ's baptism. The connection, though, is that connection of birth. It's no mistake that we refer to baptism as a rebirth. It's a once in a lifetime event! We come into this world through the breaking of waters, and so too we break the waters of

the font as we are baptized into Christ. Just as we are once born into the world, so too one baptism marks our transition from the old life into the life of the Spirit. In Genesis 1 we read about God giving birth to all creation through the separation of the waters and the creation of light.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a gift because it is God's water breaking to give birth to a new creation. Just as we come into this world because of the grace and love of others to create us and carry us, so too we receive the Holy Spirit at the will of a God who creates us for relationships. We're born at the hands of a God who carries us through trials and triumphs. As the Holy Spirit appears to us, we find much more than our own repentance of sin. We find the absolute reality of God's forgiveness, a grace that precedes not only our confession but a grace that undergirds the very content of our life. Just as water surrounds us in the ocean, just as taking in water sustains our lives, just as water pervades the cells of our being, so too the Holy Spirit surrounds us, giving life a buoyance that changes our reality. So too the Holy Spirit sustains us, parches our thirsts and restores strength to weary wanderers. So too the Holy Spirit pervades every ounce of our being, transforming our human existence with the constancy of God's divine presence. That's the kind of gift that we see in Jesus' baptism. The Holy Spirit coming to humanity, changing our trajectory from death to life.

This week Michelle and I encountered a troubling experience with water, or more accurately, without it. Thursday morning we awoke to frozen pipes, and of course I only realized this after I'd lathered up my head in the shower. As the faucet dripped and dried, the only thing left to wash over me was the realization of how difficult the day would be without water. Brushing my teeth? Possible, but gritty. Rinsing this hair? Not an option. Drinking? No. Washing hands? Not really, nor much sanitation at all. Life

without water is not just dirty, it's not just inconvenient. Without water, life is eventually impossible. That's why ancient cities required a water source, why Roman aqueducts led to the thriving of an empire.

Yet, even as water gives life, there's also a devastating potential within H₂O. Time and again in recent history tsunamis have destroyed coastal cities and inland villages. Unchecked water erodes topsoil and carries away nutrients, leaving fields feeble. On a number of mission trips to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Michelle and I saw firsthand the destructive power of water. Carrying ships inland. Ripping homes off foundations. Even laying stagnant for days, rotting wood and drywall from the inside out.

Whenever water comes in to play, we never remain unchanged. Whether hydrating our cells or flooding our basements, water is something with which we must always contend, something that always works to change our lives. But like the chaotic formless void out of which God brought creation into being, God takes things with indiscriminate power and turns them toward Gospel goodness. It is no accident that the same God who flooded the earth to rid creation of evil now brings salvation through a ritual that involves breaking of water. God knows the power of water, God created water with this power! And so, the Holy Spirit, a person of power and the source of our life, comes to us in water, a very powerful, life-giving thing.

Just as the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters at creation, so too the Holy Spirit hovers over the waters of baptism, beginning first with the baptism of Jesus, all as a gift to humanity. Yes, the Holy Spirit is our baptismal gift! Often Christians talk about spiritual gifts, about the gifts the Spirit brings with – tongues and interpretation, discernment and

prophecy, healing and miracles, knowledge, wisdom faith, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self control – all these things!

But core to our faith is that the Holy Spirit, this third person of God, is a gift. The gift within baptism is the permanent presence of God with us. Only a few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas, where we declared Jesus as Emmanuel, as God with us. But in this resurrection life, as Jesus sits at the right hand of God the Father, it is the Holy Spirit, the one we receive in baptism, who continually unites us with God. The gift of baptism, the reason we see the Trinity at work together here in Mark, is that the powerful gift of life is presently placed within us, sealed by the Holy Spirit's continual presence.

Baptism is not an obligation, nor is it a decision of ours. Baptism is God's gift of God's self. Baptism is God's gift of God's life, lived within us as the Holy Spirit breathes our breaths, sees our scenery, lives our very lives. Let's give thanks to the God who gives birth to us in our baptisms, the God whose water broke to renew our lives with the Holy Spirit. Amen.