

Scriptures: Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7 Baptism by Water and the Spirit

This week the church celebrated Epiphany – remembering when the Wise Men came to see the Christ child in Bethlehem. The Wise Men gave Jesus gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh. They were expensive gifts, fit for a king. And the Scriptures also record that the Wise Men worshipped Jesus when they came to Him. The Wise Men gave gifts from their wealth, and from their hearts. I'd like you to keep that in mind while we examine the two Scripture passages today on baptism.

Read Acts 19:1-7

Earlier today we read Mark's account of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Jesus' baptism is also recorded in Matthew 3, and Luke 3. All the accounts state that Heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, and a voice came from Heaven saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; I am pleased with you." Prior to this, we see a bit of John the Baptist's discussion in verse 7: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." John the Baptist baptized with water, he says in verse 8, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Who's John talking about? Right, Jesus! Jesus came after John the Baptist, and was much greater than him.

We also read that John's baptism was one of repentance, of people confessing their sins. Could John forgive their sins? Of course not – only the Person offended by the sin can forgive it. That's why Jesus came – God offended by the sin of disobedience became a Man and suffered and died on the Cross to pay the price. Only Jesus can forgive the sins of the world, because He's ultimately the One wronged and offended by sin. I know what you're thinking – wait a minute – I've been wronged before, I've been hurt by sin. That's true, but like it or not, your experiences with being hurt or wronged by others is just collateral damage.

Baptism by Water

Could the water of baptism wash away the sins? No. Only the blood of Jesus does that. See friends, water baptism has been around for a real long time, it dates from before Jesus' earthly ministry. If we think – and there some people who do think this – that we can get baptized and the water somehow magically washes our sins off and allows us to keep on doing what we like to do without any change in our behavior, then we're way off track. Don't get me wrong – a baptism service with water is important. The ancient church used it to show their

commitment to living a life of faith in Jesus, and we still do today. That's why we baptize babies and have a service calling on the congregation – as the family of faith – to nurture and assist the child in growing up with a heart focused on Jesus. And then when they get old enough to understand what the parents did on their behalf, we confirm them into the church. It's a process we use to teach and mentor young people into a life of faith and help them to understand that their baptism service was an outward sign of an inward change, of becoming a re-created person in Jesus.

Look again at what Paul asked the disciples in Ephesus in our text from Acts: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" See, friends, there is something great and mysterious that occurs in the heart of believers when they yield control and rule over their lives to Jesus, rather than holding it to themselves. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" It's the same thing as the strange warming of the heart at Aldersgate that Wesley talked about. You know that you know, and finally understand that everything's going to be alright despite all the chaos and upheaval in life.

Paul asks these disciples, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" These guys are clueless. "What?! The Holy Spirit?! Who's He?!" "We haven't even heard there is a Holy Spirit." That's what they say. Just imagine how this must've played out. Kendra used to work at a bank. Now, don't take this the wrong way – she's real smart, probably one of the most intelligent people I know. Anyhow, there was another teller at the bank who had been working there for about a month, and one day someone came in and gave her a half dollar coin, with John F. Kennedy on the front, and the eagle and "half dollar" on the back. You know what she asked? "How much is it worth?"

See, we can sit and laugh about stuff like this, but it really happens. In general, people are really clueless. We really are sheep. I'm glad that God uses them in the Bible as a metaphor for people, because it makes a lot of sense. We follow the crowd, we grab hold of an idea and run with them instead practicing patience and rational thought, and we're fundamentally lazy. I've never met a person who said, "Yes, I'd love to work hard without compensation." Have you? It's the same sort of thing that sheep do. They're herd animals, run off on a whim, and will usually stay put in one place as long as they have some grass to chew on.

So Paul asks them, "What baptism did you receive?" He's trying to find out what we call the 5 w's: who baptized them, when, where, and why. They tell him "John's baptism." So we're talking about the water baptism. Paul explains the difference between John's baptism and Jesus to them, and they decide they want Jesus. The Scripture reading today says, "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." As soon as they heard it – there was no waiting around, no "let me do this and this first," it was immediate.

Christianity became the state religion in the Roman Empire under Constantine the Great in the 300's AD. He stopped the persecution of the Church by the Roman Empire, called several church councils which wrote the Apostle's Creed, and solidified the order of books we now have in the Old and New Testaments, funded the building of churches in the Holy Land and Asia Minor, and made Christianity the national religion of Rome. Yet he wasn't baptized until he was on his deathbed. He mistakenly thought that in order to receive salvation, he had to be baptized, and that the baptism would wash away his sins, and was afraid that if he was

baptized and then sinned afterwards, there would be no atonement available to cover that sin. I think he followed Jesus, and did a great many things to bring Jesus' kingdom closer to coming, and certainly showed his love to the church by ending persecution and martyrdom of followers of Jesus, but he was so hung-up on the water and didn't grasp that it's an outward sign of an internal heart-change. There are a lot of people running around here with a whole lot of hang-ups, thinking the same thing or similar things. "I better wait until I am more financially stable, or have had more training, or have a good wife or husband, or when I die I'll do something for the church." Think of what legacy Constantine the Great could have left, had he only seen water baptism the way we do, and would have fully allowed the baptism by the Spirit to grip his life!

Baptism by the Spirit

"On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." They didn't wait. There was no hesitation. They heard the Word from Paul, and they took a leap of faith without consideration of the outcome. Look what happens next: Paul laid his hands on them. That's an old-time thing that shows among other things, a passing of authority. So Paul lays hands on them and they're filled with the Holy Spirit – baptism by the Spirit – and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. Today's reading ends with giving us an account of how many men there were who experienced this baptism by the Spirit. Scripture records that there were about twelve men who had this experience at this particular point in time. There are other instances in the Scriptures that talk about similar events; one that comes to mind is the Pentecost account recorded in Acts 2.

The bottom line is that these fellows all had previously received a baptism by water – like most of us here today have done, either as an infant by our parents, or later in our teenage or adult years. They then had a spiritual experience – a baptism by the Holy Spirit, and that's something maybe some of us haven't yet experienced, but we need to. I am becoming more and more convinced that people in general – and the persons mentioned in the New Testament of the Bible in particular – come to a precise moment in time where they realize – and say aloud in some way, shape, or form – "Jesus, I need You," and determine to hand Him over the reins of their lives – they make a decisive decision to let Jesus be King and reign over them, so that as Paul would say, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). They become a new person, a new creation. They have a conversion experience – Paul had one on the road to Damascus while he was hunting and killing Christians – and I am seeing more and more the beauty on the pages of Scripture, of a pattern between having a re-creation experience with Jesus resulting in a life bent towards doing things the way Jesus would do them if He were in their skins. That means seeing a need and filling it, without expectation of being compensated or getting something back for it. Remember the time Jesus healed the ten lepers in Luke 17? Only one came back to thank Him. Jesus didn't go around healing people and telling them, "Now I've done this for you, you have to do this for me now." He did things, like rescuing the woman caught in adultery in John 8, and simply said, "Go and sin no more." We would be wise to do likewise – to take Jesus' advice to our adulterous hearts and "Go, and sin no more."

Remember those Wise Men that visited Jesus in Bethlehem? We talked about them at the beginning of the service today. They gave Jesus heart-felt gifts from the wealth He had blessed them with. With us just coming into the New Year, 2018, what heartfelt gifts will you give Him from what He's already blessed you with? Will 2018 be the year that you let Him completely, totally rule over you, and give you a baptism – a renewal – by the Spirit that pours from Him into you and into others around you?