

"Baptized and then?"
The Baptism of Our Lord *transferred*
14 January 2024
Trinity+Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Saint Mark 1:4-11

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This particular Sunday leads all of us to the baptismal font, and from that vantage point to an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. What we teach about baptism is that we are adopted into God's kingdom, and into Christ's body, the Church. In addition there is an inward and spiritual grace given in baptism, namely, "union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, *and a new life in the Holy Spirit.*" That is how the Book of Common Prayer describes it. It is this new life in the Holy Spirit that interests me, not just theologically, but also practically. How is this new life, in the Church, a resource for all the people of God?

In Isaiah 11, the prophet dreams about an ideal Davidic king who will lead Israel back into their relationship with God. As he describes this ideal ruler, he lists the attributes that will be given as the ruler is endowed with gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts can be seen and evidenced in our own lives as well.

*"The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him:
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
A spirit of counsel and of strength,
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD,
and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD.
Not by appearance shall he judge,
nor by hearsay shall he decide,"*

St. Thomas Aquinas understood these gifts to be: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel (Right Judgement), Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and the Fear of the Lord. These are the gifts that we look for in ourselves and in others as we seek to do God's will in our lives, in the Church, and in our Community. Thus, Baptism is not the end, but rather the beginning of growing in faith, self, and love of God and neighbor. It is a process of knowing and learning again what we have been given. In many churches the Baptismal Font is placed at the doors of the church so that people can recall not only their baptism long ago, but their reentry into the church each Sunday and Holy Day. Touching the water, they remember their call to life informed by their baptism.

Saint John Chrysostom gives the example of ten blessings of Baptism:

"Let us say again: Blessed be God, who alone does wonderful things, who does all things and transforms them. Before yesterday you were captives, but now you are free citizens of the Church; lately you lived in the shame of your sins, but now you live in freedom and justice. You are not only free, but also holy; not only holy, but also righteous; not only righteous, but also sons and daughters; not only sons and daughters, but also heirs; not only heirs, but also brothers and sisters of Christ; not only brothers and sisters of Christ, but also joint heirs; not only joint heirs, but also members; not only members, but also the temple; not only the temple, but also instruments of the Spirit."

It is his notion that Baptism makes us "instruments of the Spirit" that interests me, and is the heart of this project. The temptation when we hear such a phrase is to think only of holy and spiritual instrumentation in our lives. I think it is beyond that however – it is really quite ordinary in nature. If we look for holiness in our lives, we may also find it in the gifts we have seen in our selves. Paul, in writing about the gifts of the Spirit, sees it in the usefulness that we have with one another in the gifts we have been given. He writes in I Corinthians,

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as she wishes.

That we should know these gifts in our lives or in our actions is not necessarily a given, and that is why this Sunday is particularly important. In the Gospel we see John's baptism as formative in the life and mind of Jesus. Might Baptism have a similar effect in our lives as we live *into* our baptism, not just move beyond it. In the Gospel's account of Jesus there is a remarkable realization. In Mark, we are privileged to realize and to witness what is a deeply internal event for Jesus. He sees the heavens torn apart. He sees the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. He hears the voice from heaven declaring that "You are my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." All this is known to Jesus, but not to the crowd who surrounds him. Mark shares with us these events so that we, like Jesus, might know the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, the descent of the Holy Spirit into our lives, and a heavenly voice that says: "You are my sons and my daughters, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

But what about life beyond the font? How might God be well pleased with us? Today happens to be the eve of an important remembrance of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the spirit of the new birth that we all share in Baptism, he wrote the following:

By opening our lives to God in Christ, we become new creatures. This experience, which Jesus spoke of as the new birth, is essential if we are to be transformed nonconformists . . . Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit.

The evils of this world are evident to us. In the confession we often ask for forgiveness for the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. It is not enough for us to tsk tsk these realities, rather we are called to confront them, as Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and countless others did. Our baptism vows call us to hear the inner call that Jesus not only heard but followed. The road beyond the font leads us into the lives of others, seeking their well-being and goodness. So later, when we renew our baptismal vows, hear God's voice calling you not only to your own personal redemption, but to the redemption of the whole world. Again, a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.

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