

"Into what will he be baptized?"

1 Epiphany B

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" Acts 19:2

Our scriptures today provide an opportunity for us to examine who and what the Holy Spirit is and does.

While serving as a chaplain I was approached by a serviceman about baptism. He was not practicing his faith as a Catholic at the time and told me he preferred that I, as his chaplain and Episcopal priest baptize him. I told him I would as a courtesy talk to my Catholic colleague. The priest asked me the question: "Into what will he be baptized?" He was not happy with my decision to go ahead. The chapel was not a church and we had no denomination at the base except a small Episcopal service and a Roman Catholic mass. The sailor only wanted to fulfill what it meant to be a Christian and that was my priority. I went ahead. In my understanding I simply was God's servant administering baptism and that God, the Holy Spirit, would Himself unite that young man with Jesus Christ.

Then, who is the Holy Spirit? Our catechism reads (on page 852 of the BCP) "The Holy Spirit is the Third person of the Trinity; God at work in the world and in the Church even now." We note both in scripture and in the prayer book, numerous references that the Holy Spirit is called God. And the foremost work of God, the Holy Spirit, is to baptize all who confess Jesus as Lord into the Spirit of Christ. While the family of God may have many denominations, the universal Church is essentially one body and one Spirit based upon "one Lord, one Faith and one Baptism". This is the reason our service of baptism starts with these words. And the Holy Spirit's role as God's agent of creation in Genesis is the "wind" that causes the human soul to become spiritually alive.

One might ask, "Why does your church baptize children, who are not able to confess Jesus as Lord?" This is a great question for which we don't always have a ready answer. Again, the scripture supports baptism for any age: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'" Where a child can not speak or confess "Jesus as Lord," parents and godparents take on the responsibility along with the church to nurture every child in the Christian faith. In the service of baptism, all of us take vows and commit ourselves to our children. The saying goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." It is no less true that it takes a church to raise that child in Christ. It takes the entire body of Christ to do the job. Our Christian education teachers know too well that a church that makes children a priority also gets involved with those children and their spiritual maturity. Yet our requests for more teachers go unanswered!

The promise of the Holy Spirit begins at baptism, when we are adopted as children of God by the seal of the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit from that day forward resides in the

child waiting to be nurtured and released by loving parents, godparents and the church. We might wonder why there are godparents and what role they take. In time past, godparents were chosen as surrogate parents should biological parents be unable to continue to raise their children. Today, as the name suggests godparents are to be spiritual guides for their “god” children, assisting parents in guiding and teaching them. Though this may seem odd today, remember it takes many godly and caring people to raise a child. Grandparents are often good choices for godparents for this reason. Many times godparents live far away from their godchildren. In that case the entire church becomes the godparent.

The Holy Spirit brings us all into God’s family and no one is out of reach of God’s love. What’s amazing is that so many people never hear of the Holy Spirit preached, as did the disciples of Ephesus. They don’t realize that Jesus came to baptize us all with His Spirit to continue His work on earth. They don’t realize that if they try to do the works of Christ in their own strength they will fail miserably. Don’t we all forget that God wants to fill us continually? The teaching of the Holy Spirit and praying to receive the Holy Spirit is not just for Pentecostals. We need Him more than ever!

Not all things are possible with men, but with God, all things are possible. We baptize infants and they become members of God’s Church. We read in scripture that Christ ascended and gave gifts to His people for service. And despite our sinful nature He uses what we give back to Him. The greatest gift of course is the Holy Spirit. God Himself makes us one with Him. At the end of the baptismal service the priest says, “You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.” God gives us the Spirit as a companion in the way of life. Christ promised He would not leave us as orphans so He sent another Comforter, to guide us into all truth. Some things may seem impossible to us. But God asks us to open our hearts to the Spirit that He may once again show the world that power for living was not just for the first Christians, but is available even now.

God will not withhold the promise of the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. While the promise begins with the embracing of a child or adult into God’s family; God is not finished. There is the continual filling of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. Some of us have taken the spiritual gifts seminar offered by the diocese and many took the assessment during the New Beginnings workshop offered here two years ago. These are designed to help Christians discover the gift or gifts God has given for service. I am convinced many of us are fearful of using God’s gifts. I am also convinced that God is grieved when His children do not put these gifts to use. What do you suppose could happen if every Christian used his or her gift for ministry? What is there to be afraid of if God gives you a word of knowledge or prophecy in prayer? What is there to be afraid of if God, through your words, brings the gift of healing into a person’s life? May we not be as those disciples in Ephesus who have never heard of the Holy Spirit.

Just this week, I received an inspiring letter from a woman who has been a part of this church off and on for over 40 years. She writes,

*“We have to keep our hearts in tune with God – I pray that people in all churches that think because they’re there, that, that makes them a Christian (or like by sitting in a garage makes you a car) can finally see His light. I pray people open their hearts, at home, alone, in church, at work, wherever, and sincerely, with love, and even desperation, ask the Lord to live inside of their very being, and, that His Spirit live within their own spirit, and that they have the ears to hear the Spirit teach them and guide them. That God’s living waters flow through their bodies with healing power to believe in. He’s an awesome God, and you and I both know that – believe and trust – isn’t simple Bob?”*

Yes, it is that simple.

I ask you daily to pray with me, “Come Holy Spirit!” May He come and fill us just as the old song sings, “Here’s my cup Lord. I give it up Lord. Come and quench this thirsting of my soul. Bread of heaven fill me ‘til I want no more. Take my cup. Fill it up and make me whole.” Amen.