

Into What Were You Baptized?  
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**Acts 19:1-7**

<sup>1</sup> While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup>He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ <sup>3</sup>Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ <sup>4</sup>Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ <sup>5</sup>On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— <sup>7</sup>altogether there were about twelve of them.

**Mark 1:4-11**

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

Do you have *any* idea what you’ve gotten yourself into? That’s not the question that Paul is asking the Ephesians in Acts but I ask you. On this day when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, we are reminded in both of our readings that John’s baptizing was not the same as the baptism offered through Christ. John says this, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John’s baptism is one accompanied by repentance. In Jesus, this is only the beginning, for Jesus does not supersede John but builds on the baptism of John. Paul wanted to make sure the Ephesians received the full baptism.

When we baptize children here, the water part of baptism is clear; the Spirit, not quite as visible. Of course, we are sure to say that the baptism is in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but I have yet to attend a baptism or preside over one where the skies opened, doves entered the sanctuary, or even where the baptized began speaking in tongues. We trust that the Holy Spirit is present, quietly among us, you might even say in a manner which is decent and orderly. It’s not to say this doesn’t happen – we Presbyterians aren’t usually watching for it, though.

We let our eyes and ears focus on the water, on the splashing it makes as it is poured, the dribbling on the forehead, and we wonder if the baby will cry. This is baptism as we recall it. If Paul were here today, I suspect he would ask us the same question: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” Fortunately for us, as with God’s presence in the whole of our lives, we don’t need to be watching for the Holy Spirit to be with us. And this leads to my question: do you have any idea what you’ve gotten yourself into?

In part of the prayer at baptism, we ask corporately that God pour out the Holy Spirit on the baptized, that the baptized may have the power to do God’s will, and continue forever in the risen life of Christ. Professor Ruthanna B. Hooke suggests “We may well underestimate the power bestowed on us at our baptism, thinking that the primary gift of this initiation into Christian community is the forgiveness of sins, and not realizing that this forgiveness and cleansing are only the first step in embracing the Christian faith.”<sup>1</sup> Oh, my. I ask you again, do you have any idea what you’ve gotten yourself into?

Professor Eugene Eung-Chun Park says, for the earliest believers, and for us, that “it is the Holy Spirit that gives them power to be witnesses of Jesus to the end of the earth, which is the very theme of the book of Acts.”<sup>2</sup> I’ll offer the thoughts of one more professor, Professor Lee Barrett – he explains that the “critical descent of the Spirit catalyzes Jesus’ potent public ministry with its exercise of power over demons, sin, the law, and even nature.”<sup>3</sup> We believe that Jesus was born 100% human and 100% divine and that this power was in him from the very beginning; the Spirit’s joining with Jesus in baptism unleashes, if you will, his power which is displayed over and over again during his ministry. We actually believe this is true for us as well. Our *Book of Order* states this belief about us, all believers, through the context of the disciples: “The disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to undertake a life of service and to be an inclusive worshiping community, sharing life in which love, justice, and mercy abounded.”<sup>4</sup> Do you have any idea what you have gotten yourself into?

Our forefather John Calvin understood the work of the Holy Spirit to be hidden, working on our souls.<sup>5</sup> This certainly resonates with our current tidy visions of the Holy Spirit. The Presbyterian apples don’t fall far from the Reformed tree. But what about the visceral messiness of the Holy Spirit? Splashing water and loud noises and flapping bird wings? This is the Holy Spirit, too. What about the mighty power? As God’s children, through Christ, the Holy Spirit has been given to us. And this means

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 232/4.

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 238.

<sup>4</sup> *Book of Order*, W-2.3001.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 240.

for us, too, like the disciples, that we have power to undertake a life of service and to be witnesses of Jesus. Do I need to ask it again?

The promises made at baptism, whether yours or those of your parents, later to be confirmed by you, are replies to these questions. Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Do you turn to Jesus Christ, and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? These two questions are typically answered with “I do.” The third – oh so very Trinitarian – question is “Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?” The reply? I will, with God’s help. I will obey Christ’s Word and show his love, with God’s help.

The Holy Spirit doesn’t sneak up on us and dump this power in our laps and then watch as we choose to use it, or not. Before Jesus returned to heaven after his resurrection, he assured his disciples that God would send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to teach everything and remind them of all he had said to them.<sup>6</sup> Reminding generally isn’t a one-time thing, especially not in faith. The Holy Spirit is here all along, waiting to nudge us into opportunities to serve, to worship, to be disciples – in big and small ways. It is the Holy Spirit who beckons us across the chasm to make the leap of faith, encourages us to jump, assures us we can make it to the other side, sometimes, even gives us the push we need. I said to someone the other day about my relationship with the Holy Spirit, “I wait to see where the Spirit drags me” because sometimes I think the Holy Spirit must look back at me, waiting for me to catch up to where the Holy Spirit already is.

We profess through our *Book of Order* that “Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.”<sup>7</sup> That is what we’ve gotten ourselves into – God’s grace and our grateful response for that grace, a connection to the people of God through Christ, a connection that cannot be broken, a gift that cannot be returned. Today, as we remember our own baptisms through the baptism of Christ by John, the Baptizer, you can look fondly on the image of sprinkled water but don’t forget the Spirit which came to you, too. What we have gotten ourselves into is bigger, and better, than we can ever be alone and is bigger and better because of the God who accompanies us in it all. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>6</sup> John 14:26.

<sup>7</sup> *Book of Order*, W-2.3006.

Let us pray: Holy Spirit, we ask your help in making us willing to follow where you go. Help us live lives that reflect your presence in them, we pray. Amen.