

January 7, 2018
Year B, Baptism of Jesus
Acts 19:1-7
“Fluidity”
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Acts 19:1-7 Good News Translation

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior of the province and arrived in Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?”

“We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” they answered.

“Well, then, what kind of baptism did you receive?” Paul asked.

“The baptism of John,” they answered.

Paul said, “The baptism of John was for those who turned from their sins; and he told the people of Israel to believe in the one who was coming after him—that is, in Jesus.”

When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul placed his hands on them, and the Holy Spirit came upon them; they spoke in strange tongues and also proclaimed God's message. They were about twelve men in all.

So I guess winter’s arrived.

And living here in Huron County, we all know what that means; snowsqualls, whiteouts and closed highways.

This week I witnessed more than one car in the ditch – and experienced my own white knuckle drive home down Mill Road.

But – once we’re warm and safe inside, there is also an awesome beauty in the frozen, wintry landscape.

It had me thinking this week, what early Christian baptisms might have looked like in Huron County, in January

Instead of full submersion in the Bayfield River, maybe flopping down on its frozen surface to make a snow angel?

Or standing beneath a snow laden evergreen, while the Baptizer tugged on a branch – causing the person below to be baptized in a frosty white shower?

Or perhaps with the sign of the cross drawn by an icicle on the forehead?

There are many different ways to perform the ritual of baptism...and even the early church was in disagreement about which way was ‘correct’.

Today we hear Paul challenging early believers on their baptisms – prodding them about what kind of baptism they received –

...which highlights not only differences in baptism, but the differences in understanding and practice that emerged with church origins. Multi-denominationalism is nothing new to Christianity, but was present from the very beginning!

Church members in Ephesus tell Paul they have been baptized according to the tradition of John – who we already know as the one wandering in the wilderness preaching repentance from sin.

So to John, and his early followers, baptism represented a change of heart – an intentional turning away from one form of behavior, toward embracing another.

Simply put: choosing good, over evil.

In other words, it was something that was personally motivated; an individual decision to change one's life.

The sort of self-improvement activity still applauded today – especially at this time of year as well-intentioned New Year's resolutions would indicate.

"I resolve to be a better person....to exercise more – eat less – be more organized...." We've all heard it (or said it!)

But along comes Paul, asking challenging questions. "Sure you've promised to improve your life" he says to those who have been baptized, "but have you received the Holy Spirit?"

And in this passage from the book of Acts, I love the honest and sheer dumbfounded-ness of the people's answer:

"We have not even heard there is a Holy Spirit!"

Well we've obviously heard of the Holy Spirit!

Today, the universal words of baptism, that unite all Christians through this same ritual, however and wherever it is performed; are "you are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

If we were baptized, these same words were once spoken over us – as we were sprinkled, or submerged or immersed.

We each, were, and are, baptized in the Holy Spirit.

And this, Paul reminds us, is very different from the baptism of John – not because for us it was at an indoor font rather than in the River Jordan – but because it is not based on repentance. Nor is it self-motivated; or because of something **we** have chosen or that **we** control, but rather, our baptism in the Holy Spirit, is entirely a free and gracious gift of God.

God's generous Spirit, symbolically alighting on each one of us, naming and claiming us as 'Beloved.'

Which might help us to understand that baptism, is not a one time event – a singular ritual that we perform and celebrate with a cake and party, or an achievement that new parents complete and check off a baby's 'to do' list.

Baptism rather, is a starting point – of living in awareness of God’s Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

And as baptized Christians, our task, throughout the rest of our lives, is to respond.

To live, as if we have not only heard of the Holy Spirit, but we are empowered by the Spirit.

....And inspired and driven by the Spirit in all our actions.

The full power of the mysterious Holy Spirit, is what not only motivates us, but gives us the ability to share the Good News of God’s love, and bring peace and liberation to all people.

Again in our reading from Acts, we hear that when Paul laid hands on the people and they received the Holy Spirit, they begin to prophesy and proclaim God’s message to all peoples in all languages.

How does our own baptism in the Holy Spirit enable us to do the same?

How does knowing that we are beloved by God, enable us to see each other person as also God’s beloved?

How does our receiving of this gracious and undeserved gift, enable us to share our gifts with others?

Yes, it is indeed Good News that we have heard of God’s Holy Spirit – it is even better news, when we can continually reveal God’s Spirit at work in our lives – in the way we treat one another.

Even here in frozen Huron County, our baptism is not something frozen in time.

It is not something rigid or stagnant or complete.

But our baptism is an ever evolving and inspiring opportunity – our starting point for a life lived in faith, gifts offered and love shared in the name of Christ.

Perhaps the best metaphor for baptism here in our northern land, is not the frozen river, the snow angels or a snow shower – but the endless shoveling that we do! As ongoing work that never ends – but keeps us busy...puts colour in our cheeks, a glow in our hearts and keeps the way clear for others!

Let us now renew our baptismal vows – as a reminder that God’s Holy Spirit continues to work in and through us.....

(ausperges)

“Remember your baptism – and live it each day!”

thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

Loving God – we give thanks for your Holy Spirit,
poured out upon us so freely and generously.

Help us to always remember, that we are your beloved;
Each one of us.

And to treat one another accordingly.

We pray that those in power, and those who make decisions regarding the lives and futures of others, also remember this.

And that our governments, and health care systems, and education institutions and prisons – be geared to the common good – with healing, dignity and learning available equally to all.

We pray for Christians everywhere – no matter how or when they were baptized – that they be renewed and inspired to live lives according to the Spirit – and to walk in the Way of Christ.

In this season of wintry cold and dangerous driving – we pray for all those affected by these conditions – across Canada, and here in Huron County, where we especially hold in our prayers the family of Grant & Ada Triebner.

We pray for all who mourn – the loss of loved ones, the loss of independence, the loss of health....

We pray for all who suffer – whether physically, spiritually or emotionally.....

We pray for students returning to school, all those returning to work, and all those travelling after the Christmas holidays – may they begin this New Year in safety and security – refreshed and inspired from their break.

We pray for those places in the world that regularly experience violence, upheaval and oppression – may your Spirit move through the faithful – uplifting and offering hope where it is sorely absent.

In the silence of our hearts God, we name these people and concerns that also need to be touched by your Spirit....

May it be so.

Amen.