

BAPTISM: AN ACT OF THE SPIRIT

Text: John 1:29-34

LHUMC 1/19/14

Baptism Series #2

I. Introduction

A. Did you make any New Year's resolutions this year?

1. How is that going?
2. Are they the same resolutions that you made last year?
3. That tends to be the case for a lot of us—we didn't do too well with it last year, so we're trying again.
4. How would you classify your resolutions? Are they based on what's on the "outside" (exercising more, eating less, losing weight, etc.)?
5. I think for most of us those tend to be more common than resolutions we make that effect us on the inside (more "spiritual resolutions" tend to be somewhat rare)
6. All the research confirms what has been my own personal experience is that those "outside" resolutions can be hard to keep.
 - a) You've probably heard the statistics that the number of those trial gym memberships goes way up in January and by March or even February, the overall number of gym memberships are back to where they were before.
 - b) My built-in excuse every year for not doing very well with my annual resolution of exercising more is that it's just too icy, and too cold, too dark to do anything, and I'm too cheap to spring for a gym membership.

B. I bring this up because I was reading an interesting article the other day that said that in these words from John the Baptist about baptism today, or more specifically his understanding of how the baptism he was offering there in the Jordan River was different than what Jesus was going to offer, you get the sense that he had a certain understanding of what that difference was.

1. As all those people came out to the river to be baptized by John in the water (and as we said last week, some were there for the right reasons, and some maybe not so much), he had a sneaking suspicion that his "water baptism" might not always take.
2. He understood that for a lot of people, true and lasting repentance is a tough thing.

3. He understood that when Jesus went from the water of his baptism into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and is able to withstand that temptation, not once, not twice, but three times, that we are not Jesus and Jesus is not us.
4. In other words, perhaps John was afraid that this baptism he was offering was kind of like a New Year's resolution for those people—maybe it changed them, but maybe long-term, not so much.
5. Perhaps it was when the Spirit came down like a dove to Jesus at the time of his baptism that John had one of those “aha!” moments.
6. Maybe he realized at that point not just the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus, but the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus is what we all need if we are ever going to have a chance to truly repent on a daily, ongoing basis.
7. It's almost as if he is saying “I baptize you with water, but if you really want eternal repentance, this may not be enough. If you want that kind of life-change, then you are going to have to submit yourself to the kind of baptism that Jesus offers—baptism by the Holy Spirit.

II. So as I've begun to ponder exactly what John meant by this “baptism of the Holy Spirit” that he said Jesus was going to offer, I'm realizing that that very phrase “baptized by the Spirit” can be a loaded phrase, mainly because it has had a number of different interpretations and has been practiced and lived out in many different ways over the years.

- A. Which leads me to ask you another question—“How many of you have been baptized by the Holy Spirit?”
1. I see some confused looks.
 2. And again, this is because what you understand by that phrase may be different depending on your religious and denominational background. Here is what I've learned about this:
 - a) If you come from a Pentecostal church background, Pentecostals tend to believe that baptism by the Holy Spirit is a separate event from being baptized by water.
 - 1) In that movement, typically folks are baptized by water at some point when they are old enough to answer the baptismal vows for themselves (that is called “believers baptism, as opposed to “infant baptism” that we practice).
 - 2) But then later on in life, you might have another experience of God that is so intense that it could only be called an act of

the Holy Spirit (thus it is called “baptism of the Holy Spirit”)

- 3) And there are usually signs that a person has experienced this kind of second baptism—the person begins to exhibit “gifts of the spirit”, which typically in a Pentecostal church is the speaking in tongues.
- b) Or if you come from a Quaker background, or also I believe that the Salvation Army has the same belief, you were raised to believe that water not only isn’t necessary for baptism, it actually is a hindrance because there is a danger that we might worship the water instead of God in the act of baptism itself.
 - 1) And so Quakers practice what is called “spiritual baptism” where it is a spiritual rather than physical act, and so the Holy Spirit plays a pivotal role in it, and water is nowhere to be found.
 - 2) So a Spirit baptism not a second baptism for Quakers, it’s really the only baptism.
 - 3) So those groups represent two ends of the spectrum.
3. What about us United Methodists?
 - a) Well, here is a clue—Hear these words that I read as an introduction anytime we baptize someone here. Taken directly from the UM Hymnal: “Through the sacrament of baptism, we are initiated into Christ’s holy church. We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.”
 - 1) The key line in there being that at baptism, we are given new birth “through water and the Spirit”
 - 2) Which would suggest that when you are baptized at a United Methodist church, regardless of your age, it’s not just the water that matters, but the Spirit is there as well.
 - 3) It’s one baptism—but it is a baptism of water and the Spirit, simultaneously.
 - b) This is further reinforced in the words that I say to the person immediately after sprinkling the water: “may the Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”
 - c) When we recognize that we are baptized by water and the Spirit simultaneously, we are also recognizing that in the Bible, it is very common that “water and the Spirit” tend to coexist.

- 1) It goes all the way back to Genesis, where at the very beginning of creation, it says that “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”
- 2) And then a little later, when Noah is on the ark in the waters, and what is it that brings back a sign of life? A dove—that eternal symbol of the Holy Spirit. Not a coincidence!
- 3) And in the story we heard last week of Jesus’ baptism, it’s pretty clear that it is at the exact moment Jesus is submerged by John in the water that the heavens open and the Spirit comes down as a dove. Those are not two separate events.
- 4) So when we say that we are baptized by water and the Spirit, we are being very biblical, if nothing else.
4. So going back to my question—the correct answer is that we believe that if you’ve been baptized by water, you’ve also been baptized by the Spirit. So if you’re ever asked that question again, if you’ve been baptized, go ahead and raise your hand!
5. My other thought is maybe we need to have a dove up here sort of riding the rapids, to make the point that any baptism by water is also a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

III. So if we are all baptized by the Spirit at the moment we get wet in our baptism, so what? What are the implications?

A. Well, for one thing, we do agree with the Pentecostals in one sense, and that is that we United Methodists also believe that at that moment of our baptism of the Holy Spirit, we really are endowed with those gifts of the Holy Spirit that Paul talked about so much in 1 Corinthians. Perhaps not the gift of speaking in tongues, but who knows?

1. And that’s another thing that I find particularly cool in baptizing infants—at that moment when I am baptizing them with water and they are also being baptized with the Holy Spirit, I always think to myself, “I wonder how has this child been gifted? In the years to come, how will this child not just discover the ways that he or she has been gifted by the Holy Spirit, but how will they live them out?”
2. When a baby is baptized by the Spirit, it is such a great moment of wonderful anticipation and infinite possibilities as we look forward to seeing the infinite ways that the Holy Spirit has and will continue to gift that child.
3. And age really isn’t that much of a factor in this—I’ve wondered the same thing when I’ve baptized older youth or even adults. Sometimes with them, there is also the question at the time of their

baptism of, “How will this person now develop the gifts that we’ve already seen in them? What difference will it make now that they have been baptized by the Holy Spirit? Will they now see what they have previously considered to be simply “things they were good at” as something infinitely more important? Will they now see them as “gifts of the Holy Spirit” to be used for the good of God’s kingdom on earth?

4. So picture at the time of baptism, yours or anyone else’s, not just the waters flowing down from heaven, but also the gifts of the Holy Spirit flowing down into the life and soul of the person being baptized. They come to us as an inevitable gift of our baptism by the Spirit.
5. As I once heard it said, “The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not something we buy—they come to us in our baptism. And so they are as hard to get as it is to get wet in the rain.”

B. And the other thing is that we also believe that maybe John the Baptist got it right when he seemed to suggest today that a baptism by water only may not be enough.

1. Here’s the thing about water—it does a wonderful job of cleansing us on the outside.
2. But as John understood, sometimes it takes the Holy Spirit to make us clean on the inside too.
3. In speaking of those who came to John the Baptist, Clayton Schmit says, “Though baptized by John with water, they were in need of the kind of empowerment that came through Jesus himself, baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is the gift of God that makes spiritual repentance something more than a resolution. As God asks us to turn from our sin, God provides (through the action of the Holy Spirit) the means to become new creatures capable of spiritual resolve.” (*Pulpit Resource*, January-March 2006, p. 12)

IV. Conclusion

A. Notice he makes the difference there between resolution and repentance.

B. A reminder that takes us back to where we started—that as well meaning as our New Year’s resolutions may be, and as hard as we may try to keep them, and even when we do, resolutions aren’t the same as repentance. Most likely, our resolutions don’t go deep enough.

C. Repentance, true repentance, repentance on the inside as well as the outside, is only possible as a gift from God, a gift that comes through

the power of the Holy Spirit, that power that comes to us at the moment of our baptism—a baptism by water and the Spirit.

- D. So today we celebrate not just the gift of baptism, but the gift of the Holy Spirit that God sends in and through the waters of our baptism.
- E. We celebrate the one who brings us this baptism of the Holy Spirit, the one that John said was far greater than him, and is far greater than us, Jesus Christ.