

January 10, 2021 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany.

And on this day, we not only remember the Baptism of the Lord, but we celebrate our own: the baptism we share with Christ.

Christ was baptized by John the Baptist.

The lectionary gospel scripture tells the story of his baptism, found in Mark, chapter 1, verse 9-11.

“⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Our scripture for this morning reflects on the importance of Christ’s baptism in the early Christian community – as the gospel was being shared around the world. This section in the book of Acts is part of a larger unit where Paul travels the world, establishing churches and spreading the good news of Christ. Our scripture specifically takes place in the Ephesian period of Paul’s ministry – which lasted more than two years.

And in order to really understand our scripture this morning – this moment of the larger story, we need to look at what happens right before this in Acts.

In Acts chapter 18, we’re told that Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew and eloquent evangelist came to Ephesus, spoke accurately concerning Jesus, but knew only the baptism of John. Thus, when he spoke in the synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately.

Then we get to our scripture today and Paul passes through Ephesus and meets disciples who had been baptized in the way of John, not Jesus. In fact, they had not even heard of a holy spirit.

It’s here where I must pause and say this short text can take one down many rabbit holes, so it’s important to name what this text does not say. This text is not about which specific rituals or rites are the best way for baptism. This text is not about whether or not these disciples who had not heard of

the holy spirit, or Apollos who also only knew the baptism of John, were really true disciples of Christ.

The holy spirit comes upon us in Pentecost – the beginning of Acts, after Christ's death and resurrection. This means Christ's 12 disciples, his mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, would not have been baptized this way – yet they are true disciples of Christ.

This text does, however, give us a unique look into the world of early Christianity. It shows us there is much diversity in what it means to be a Christian during this time. And it also shows that Christians were eager to learn more about Christ and humble enough to receive instruction.

These disciples that Paul encounters immediately want to be baptized in Christ's name, when Paul informs them about Baptism in Christ. What's at the heart of this text, what this text *is* about is the Holy Spirit. Her importance, her power, and her presence in baptism in Christ. And what happens when the Holy spirit is within us.

The Holy Spirit comes upon these disciples once they are baptized in the name of Christ and calls them to action. After the holy spirit descends upon them, they begin to speak in tongues and prophesied.

Now, we usually tend to think that prophecy has to do with foretelling future events, but in Luke's Gospel and Acts, to prophesy is to speak about the present; it is to speak in God's name on behalf of God's work in the world.

And you might be a bit uneasy to hear that the holy spirit called the disciples to speak in tongues.

I think us Presbyterians or many mainline protestant denominations like to avoid talking about speaking in tongues all together.

But in his commentary on this passage, Jacob Myers gives a good context into which we can better understand. He writes,

“Tongue speaking can be construed as a mode of discourse that refuses to conform to reificatory patterns of thought and speech. It overwhelms speech by exposing it to an otherness beyond convention. Such discourse, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can dismantle systems of thought that subjugate and marginalize human others.”

In other words – it pushes the status quo of what is acceptable or normal in the empire. It pushes the notion of a “right way in to speak,” opening up space for those deemed as other in the ways they speak, and even beyond to include all those we deem as other.

If we look at prophecy through this lens: the lens of breaking the status quo: then in Acts 19 1-7, Myers states “we are able to discern an undeniable truth: inauguration into the way of Jesus *empowered* by the Holy Spirit disrupts and deconstructs the status quo linguistically (tongue speaking) and ethically (prophesying).” The holy spirit demands action. She demands to be heard.

I’m sure I was not the only one rocked and scared by the events Wednesday at the capitol, when rioters wearing Trump paraphernalia and carrying confederate flags, some even wearing Auschwitz sweatshirts, violently broke into the capital with the intent of breaking the democratic process of a peaceful transition of power.

To date, five are dead from this riot, fueled by the false claims of election fraud by President Trump.

And among the disturbing and frightening images that have since come forth – images of the offices of speakers being broke into, of rioters posing for selfies on the house floor, there is an image of one rioter caring a sign that says Jesus Saves. Jesus Saves. To hold a sign that says Jesus Saves while violently storming the capitol to try and unjustly defy a fair election – an event that ended up taking 5 lives – and to do it the company of far-right white supremacists– is heresy of the highest form. And it takes Christ’s name in vain. The Lord’s name in vain.

The Holy Spirit in Acts 19 reminds us the two-fold truth of our baptism in Christ: that we must go out into the world and bear witness to Christ’s gospel, and we must **loudly denounce** when the gospel is being used in vain, in violence, for purposes that the defile the kingdom of God.

Each and every one of us here today has the voice of the prophet within us through the Holy spirit. We must listen when she demands to speak.

What strikes me the most about our scripture today is that the disciples Paul encounters didn’t even know there was a Holy Spirit.

I can imagine them going about their mission and work, faithfully spreading the news of Christ – perhaps thinking they were fulfilled in their faith.

And then they meet Paul. And he tells them there's this thing called a baptism in Christ, and the Holy spirit comes upon you and she opens your world. She gives you boldness and courage to challenge the status quo of empire through speech and prophecy. They didn't even know how good it could be. How much more their faith could transform them – and the world through them.

Don't underestimate the power of your baptism. Baptism by the Holy Spirit in Luke's account of the early church in Acts gave the followers of Jesus power to proclaim the gospel with boldness, and to do so in tongues that all could understand. The spirit guided these early disciples to bring the gospel far beyond where they had initially thought it could go, leading them to open the church to Gentiles, like the Ephesians in today's text.

Through your baptism in Christ, you have that same Spirit within you.

Listen to her.

Perhaps, you too, when embracing the Holy spirit within you and taking action – can use your prophetic voice to denounce systems fueled and molded on the foundations of racism and white supremacy, the systems and people who planned, executed, and encouraged the attack on the Capitol, the systems and people who, in doing so, plague the Kingdom of God. Maybe then, just like those disciples, you'll find that your faith has taken you to new places, new ways of fulfillment and transformation, that you didn't even know existed. That you had never heard of.

Our baptism is not just a singular act, it's a lifelong call. A lifelong action guided by the Holy Spirit.

On this baptism of the Lord Sunday – the first Sunday after epiphany – we must remember our baptism. And then ask– how are we living out our baptism now?

Thanks be to God. Amen.