

“It’s Not Just About the Water”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, January 7, 2018

Mark 1

The people were filled with expectation, and all were standing by the side of the River Jordan as John the Baptist baptized the people, one by one, in the river.

And John said to the people, ‘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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’”

And then, here in our passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is being baptized by John in the Jordan. ‘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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”’

A commentator suggested that this moment should be all about fireworks as the heavens are torn apart. There should be drama.

And the dove shouldn’t gently waft down to hover over Jesus’ head but rather be a dive-bombing pigeon.

In Jesus’ baptism, a lot more is going on. The heavens are torn, the veil between heaven and earth is broken. It is a revelatory moment that reveals Jesus for who is – God’s Son. God is present to the world.¹

In our Acts passage, Paul meet some disciples and asks them about their baptism. “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’”

Paul asks, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” 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.

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them.” (Acts 19: 1-7)

The baptism that Paul presents in Acts is a Christian baptism, where they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And Paul demonstrated that baptism is not just about the water, but is all about the Spirit being present.

¹ Sermon Brainwave #580, Baptism of Our Lord, posted Dec 30, 2017 @ www.workingpreacher.org.

The meaning of baptism expands with Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and indeed Jesus' final words to his disciples will be: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Mt 28:19).

We often speak of baptism as a "means of grace," that is, one of the ways that God's grace comes to us.

Physically it's only a small splash of water, but it marks the beginning of a whole new life -- of forgiveness, of the presence of God's Spirit, of our union with Jesus, and our becoming part of the world-wide Christian church!²

We baptize here this morning with good old Stouffville tap water. And we pray over the water because it's not just about the water.

We 'invoke' the Holy Spirit to be present, to be with us in only the way the Holy Spirit can – spontaneously, unscripted, unpredictable.

In 1982, the World Council of Churches published a document called 'Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry' or BEM for short. It represented years of work to reach a consensus amongst worldwide churches around the formulae used for Baptism and the theology behind the sacrament of baptism.

From the BEM document, we read, "The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of the people before, in, and after their baptism. It is the same Spirit who revealed Jesus as the Son (Mark 1:10-11) and who empowered and united the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2).

God bestows upon all baptized persons the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit, marks them with a seal and implants in their hearts the first installment of their inheritance as sons and daughters of God."³

Baptism is only the beginning of the journey, not the end. Riley and Lexi have received the 'first installment' today, but as they grow in faith, the Spirit will be there again to guide them.

In time, they will answer the questions their parents answered for them today on their own as part of their own Confirmation.

Anne Lamott, an American Spiritual writer, wrote of baptism: "Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under.

But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that's a little sloppy because at the same time, it's also holy, and absurd.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2313

³ BEM, p. 2

It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched."

While Lexington and Riley did not get drenched with water, their souls were drenched by the presence of God.

That moment standing with the crowds by the Jordan was real for Jesus. He heard the voices around him. He would have felt the excitement and the questions and the murmurs.

And then he stood, waist deep in the waters of the Jordan, with John in front of him, their eyes meeting.

Jesus was baptized. And as he came out from the water the dove descended, and he heard the words, 'You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased.'

Baptism is not just about the water. It's about the Holy Spirit.

And just as Riley and Lexi felt the warm waters of baptism on their forehead, the Holy Spirit whispered the words, "and you are my beloved."
Thanks be to God. Amen.