

Mark 1:4-11 ⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and from Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "One more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And 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."

Acts 19:1-7 ¹ While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ² 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." ³ Then Paul said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ 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." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied – ⁷ altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11 and Acts 19:1-7
01/10/2021 – Saginaw First UMC
"By Water and the Spirit"
Rev. Amy Terhune

I want to start this morning where our scriptures end: with the Holy Spirit. Normally, we talk about the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but the Holy Spirit doesn't exist for a day and then go into hiding. No, the Holy Spirit works tirelessly day in and day out, often unseen and unrealized. The Spirit is God's gift to humankind, and as far as we know, the Spirit exists primarily for the sake of humankind. The Spirit's purpose is to point beyond itself. Part of the reason the Holy Spirit is so difficult to get a handle on is because it doesn't want to be handled, or studied, or analyzed. The Holy Spirit's purpose is to be a catalyst – a channel or conduit to take us from one spiritual plane to another, to bring us into the very presence of God, to foster connections between and amongst us, to inspire insight, challenge sin or apathy, ignite action. The Holy Spirit works within the human spirit to help us know God.

According to the Biblical Record, the Holy Spirit made itself known and felt at Pentecost, but it has always been a part of God's work among us. The book of Genesis opens with memorable words: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, until a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light." The word used there for wind is Ruah, which is also translated both as breath and as Spirit. My colleague, Rev. Chris Weitzel, notes that "...It was the Holy Spirit that made a difference between a world merely existing in an inanimate state, and a world full of life..." [from Rev. Chris Weitzel, <https://messyfaith59764425.wordpress.com/2021/01/09/god-is-not-like-us/>].

When the United Methodist Church sought to teach people what it believes about Baptism, it published that work with the title "By Water and the Spirit". Clearly, that title suggests that both water and Spirit have a role to play as we explore our scripture lessons for this morning.

“For those of us who follow the revised common lectionary, we have now entered the season of Epiphany. "Epiphany" is a word that means "to appear", "to reveal" or "to make known." The first Sunday after Epiphany commemorates the baptism of our Lord—a time when the voice from heaven "makes it known" that Jesus is "my son, the Beloved." The Last Sunday after the Epiphany (February 14th this year) is always the Transfiguration of our Lord—a time when a voice from heaven will again "make it known" that Jesus is "my son, the Beloved." [from Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes, illustrations on Baptism of the Lord, www.Sermons.com.]

Admittedly, I have something of a love-hate relationship with Baptism of the Lord Sunday. For one thing, it shows up every year, right on schedule, and only one month after we read about it in Advent as we're introduced to John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Emmanuel. I mean, how much can one say about this same passage one month later? I suppose it shows up every year because there is a certain theological anxiety around the whole notion of Jesus being baptized. Why would the Son of God—the sinless one, our savior—need to go through baptism for the repentance of sins? I don't feel a need to drag you through the academic tumult that rises up in the wake of a question like that because I can accept that Jesus was baptized, not because he was sinful, but because I am. Like the babe in a manger or the dying one on the cross, this is but another example of how God identifies with me, shares my suffering and understands my needs. God has never yet asked me to do something through which He Himself is not prepared to lead me. So if I am to plunge beneath the baptismal waters into rebirth, then he will model it first. It's actually quite simple. Baptism isn't something we do. Baptism has always been about what God is doing.

To his credit, John knew that. He knew that God was doing something. And he knew that God was about to do something beyond anything they'd ever seen, known, or experienced. "I baptize you with water," said John, "but One greater than me is coming, and that one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." I baptize you with water. It can cleanse you. It can renew you. It can give you hope. It can symbolize repentance, the turning away from sin, the acknowledgement that we need God.

The late, great preacher Fred Craddock wrote this about John the Baptist: "What's frightening about listening to John preach is that he puts you in the presence of God. And that's what everybody wants, and that's what everybody doesn't want. Because the light at the altar is different from every other light in the world. In the dim lamps of this world, we can compare ourselves with each other, and all of us come off looking good. We convince ourselves that God grades on the curve, and what's the difference? We're all okay. And then you come in the presence of God, and you're at the altar, and it's all different. For if our hearts condemn us, think of this – God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. There's no way to modulate the human voice to make a whine acceptable. The whining is over. The excusing is over. It's the school, it's the church, it's the board, it's the government. It isn't! All that's over. It just stops. Like waking from a dream of palaces and patios to find the roof leaks and the rent's due. Like shutting off the stereo, and you hear the rat gnawing in the wall. That's just the fact of it. In my mind, I serve God. But there's another force in my life, and I say, 'I'm going to do that.' I don't do it. I say, 'I'll never do that.' I do it. Crucified between the sky of what I intend and the earth of what I perform. That's the truth." [from Fred B. Craddock, "Have You Ever Heard John Preach?", *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today's Preacher*, ed. Thomas G. Long & Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 34-43.]

John makes us confront the truth. That's what prophets do. He calls us to repent. That's another thing prophets do. The words scripture uses for Repent is *Metanoia* – it means "to change one's mind", basically. The water of repentance helps us change and grow. Water shapes us, wearing away our rough edges. That's what water does.

But as Jesus comes up out of the water, something else washes over him. The heavens are torn apart, the text says, as something radically new takes shape within the person of Jesus. Something that drives him into the desert to face 40 days of temptation, something that demands he wrestle with his own identity, his own calling. That something is the Holy Spirit. It doesn't just wash away the old, it ushers in the new. With the Spirit, we move beyond metanoia and the changing of one's mind into metamorphosis and the changing of one's being. We move beyond repentance for the disparity between the sky of what I intend and the earth of what I perform to the horizon where earth and sky meet and what is possible in God takes shape before us. In the Spirit is more than the shedding of the old life. In the Spirit is the newness of life in all its fullness.

In Ephesus, Paul discovers a small band of followers who have been baptized into John's baptism of repentance. In ancient days, Ephesus was the home of the great temple of Artemis, and people from all over the empire would go there to worship. Thus, it was a prosperous and cosmopolitan city with people in it from all over the world. Paul encounters these followers who don't know the whole story, although how he knows they are followers is beyond me because they don't seem to know who Jesus is or what he did. But Paul shares with them the good news of Jesus Christ, they are baptized by water and the Spirit, and Acts goes on to report that the church in Ephesus became so powerful that the silversmiths in Ephesus rioted because their business was being impacted by Christians no longer buying the things they made in honor of Artemis. There is no doubt here that Paul did more than change a few people's minds. Paul simply opened a few to the possibility and power of the Spirit, and the Spirit went to work. It can change more than minds. It can change hearts, and culture, and systems, and power structures. The Spirit brings new life, but not without new challenges. The Spirit opens up new possibilities, but not without change. And change and challenges scare people.

I think we saw some of that this week. There has been anger brewing in this nation a long time. As we've become more diverse, and as those who were traditionally marginalized have demanded a hearing in more mainstream arenas, change and challenge has unsettled us. The past 100 years, from the First World War, the Depression, the Second World War, McCarthyism and the rise of Communism, the Civil Rights Movement, economic volatility, women's liberation and gay rights, shifting educational standards and scientific advancements, and the development of the internet and social media have ushered us through an unprecedented time of transformation. We don't all see it the same. Some of it is great. Some it isn't. And we don't agree on what's what. We are more aware of the fact that there are no simple dichotomies anymore. Everything is pluralistic now. America's face has changed, and so have the institutions and social mores that once united us. For some, that is terrifying, and we have a natural human instinct to believe that when something terrifies us, it must be wrong or evil or God-forsaken. And as it becomes more and more possible through social media and virtual connections to retreat into our own worlds and echo-chambers of people who think like we do, we risk losing the art of understanding, empathy, and dialogue with those who are different. It is an art. It's a skill. And it's hard. But it is my belief that the water and the Spirit call us inward in reflection, outward in compassion, and upward in direction. Left and right will not get us far.

So let me close this morning by giving you a little exercise of what this means. "Find a piece of paper and a writing instrument — pen, pencil, crayon, hidden chocolate... whatever you can locate. You don't need much space to write on. You could even do this in your Bible, since you might want to save what you're going to do next.

"Now, make an "I" that goes up and down so that it looks like the number 1. That's the power of the perpendicular. The power of one, the power of you, the power of a proud ego standing tall and strong as the #1 "I." You have power. God gave it to you. It's good. When you are baptized, you are

asked three questions. The first is to repent of sin and the third is to confess Christ and serve Him, but the second is this: “do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” Hear that question again: do you accept the freedom and power God gives you? The question assumes that you will resist evil injustice and oppression. What we want to know is if you accept the freedom and power God gives you. You have freedom and power. It’s God’s gift by the Spirit. So write your “I” strong and proud.

“Now cross out that “I” with a horizontal line. That’s right, just cross it out. That’s what Jesus did on the cross, and that’s the sign of the cross the “I” crossed out. Not to obliterate your “I” – not to obliterate your power, quite the contrary – but to give your “I” wings, to give your vertical a horizontal so that you can rise, and live, and be fulfilled as the person God made you to be. [Illustration on the “I” crossed from “Full Immersion” by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.] We are baptized into Christ by water and the Spirit, and this is God’s gift, offered to us without price. Use it to rise. Amen.