

## **Jesus' Baptism and Our Immersion**

*Sermon Preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

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Our first passage comes from the very beginning of the gospel of Mark. Unlike Matthew and Luke, which set the stage for Jesus' ministry by writing first of his birth and the events leading up to it, Mark jumps right in with John the Baptist and the adult Jesus coming to John to be baptized. Listen for how John describes Jesus and the way Jesus will baptize. And listen for the affirmation the voice from heaven gives as Jesus comes out of the water. *Read Mark here.*

Our second passage is found in the 19<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the book of Acts - or as it is traditionally known, The Acts of the Apostles. More than one commentator has said that Acts should be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit, because it is the Holy Spirit that animates and empowers the earliest Christians to do the things that they do - to live in the way of Jesus. That Holy Spirit continues to be what empowers people to live in Jesus' way. In the text I'm about to read, Paul comes across some disciples who do not even know there is a Holy Spirit. He baptizes them in Jesus name, and they receive a sort of confirmation. Watch for the fireworks that ensue. *Read Acts here.*

Friday night, our annual confirmation process kicked off with a lock-in over in the Meeting House. If Jim Stover and Jen Abi-Najm look a little ragged around the edges, it is because fifteen of our seventeen confirmands spent the night, and some of those stayed up 'til five in the morning. I spent the night, too, but I crashed about midnight!

The lock-in was fun of course, but I think the most important part of the evening happened earlier. As we have done for the past several years, we started the event by having the parents of the confirmands, and some of our elders and confirmation mentors, gather with our eighth-graders for a time of reflection on the meaning of baptism. There were about fifty of us altogether. We talked about how baptism is a visible sign and seal of God's grace - a love that claims us before we are ever able to respond. But we also talked about how this grace calls for our response, which meant that we discussed how confirmation is an opportunity to affirm and claim for ourselves the vows that were taken on our behalf at baptism (if we were baptized as infants). And we emphasized that confirmation is just a step on a lifelong journey of faith and commitment. As one parent and former mentor put it, the day of confirmation is not an end, it is more like a beginning.

That is why it is no accident that we always begin our confirmation process on the same weekend when churches the world over celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. Because Jesus' baptism, as an adult, was a confirmation of sorts - and it too was only a beginning... It marked the *start* of his public ministry. When the heavens were torn apart, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove, and a voice from above said, "You are my beloved child, I delight in you." That was just the beginning of Jesus' work of ministry. In Mark's view, at least, Jesus was only getting started with his work of fleshing out the love of God in the world. And you should note that the descent of the Spirit was what equipped him for that work.

The book of Acts tells us that some time later, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul came upon some disciples and asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit when they became believers. Acts doesn't let us know what prompted Paul to pose that question, but it is clear from the answer of the disciples that whatever receiving the Holy Spirit meant, they had not done it. "We haven't even heard there is a Holy Spirit," was their reply.

Some wag has joked that these were the forerunners of Presbyterian Christians. This is a little harsh. As Bruce Douglass would attest, John Calvin has plenty to say about the Holy Spirit in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. And much of what Calvin has to say relates to how the Spirit lives and works in the lives of believers. But I do have to report that I knew a woman in a previous congregation, a lifelong Presbyterian, who told me that she was in her sixties before she ever really heard a sermon on the Holy Spirit in church. That is a long time to go without hearing a sermon on the Holy Spirit.

There are a variety of reasons, I think, why some people shy away from talking about the Holy Spirit. Perhaps chief among them is that we come across Biblical texts, like this one in Acts, which link the Holy Spirit coming upon people with speaking in strange languages. Because most of us don't speak in strange languages (aside from those who speak Portuguese, or German, or some other foreign tongue), we don't want people to think that speaking in strange tongues is the sole, or a primary, or even a necessary indicator of the Spirit being present in one's life. Indeed, Paul himself would say that it is not. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, he mentions the gift of speaking in tongues, but he goes on to say that there are a variety of other gifts - and that the most important gift of all is love. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit and says that the evidence of the Holy Spirit being active in a person's life is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

The best indicator of the Holy Spirit being present in a person's life is not whether or not he or she speaks in different tongues. It is whether or not a person lives in Jesus' way. This congregation is full of people who do just that.

But how does it happen that someone comes to live in Jesus' way? I think it goes beyond simply acknowledging that God exists, crafting some sort of faith statement, or even occasionally turning our lives in God's direction.

Maybe that is why the Apostle Paul in that text from Acts distinguishes between John's baptism and baptism in Jesus' name. Paul tells the people he meets in Acts that John's baptism was about repentance. Repentance is turning to God. The Hebrew word translated repentance literally means, "turn"; the Greek word literally means a change of mind - but both involve turning Godward. What makes baptism in Jesus' name different is that it involves more than a turning in God's direction. It involves being open to being used by God, it involves opening oneself to the power of God's love flowing in and through one's being and actions.

I love the way one of *my* mentors in faith described the meaning of the word baptism to me. He went back to what the original Greek word, *baptizo*, literally meant. It literally meant "to dip so as to

change.” As my mentor reported it, this word was used for more than just describing a religious ritual cleansing. There were a lot of ways to dip, or immerse something so that it might be changed. The Greeks would baptize cloth in dye to color it. They would baptize arrows in poison to make them more effective. They would baptize hot molten metal, plunging it into cold water to help it harden. They would baptize bread in the stews and sauces that continue to be so much a part of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cuisine so that the bread would take on the flavor of the stew in which it was dipped.

As my mentor talked about the original meaning of the word, it occurred to me that this is what happens in the church. When we baptize a child (or an adult), we are pledging to immerse them in the way of Jesus, so that their way of looking at the world is colored by the love of God. In so doing they are both hardened to be able to withstand the vagaries of life and softened to be able to respond to others with compassion, so that their lives take on the flavor of the Christian community and its priorities and they become more effective disciples. The way we begin to live in the Jesus way is to become immersed in it and in so doing begin to catch that Spirit which leads us into a life of worship, service, learning, and fellowship - a life lived for others.

We should rightly be cautious about linking the words of politicians with the inspiration of Holy Spirit, but I wonder if John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, delivered back in January of 1961, didn’t have a little of that sort of Spirit - the Holy Spirit - in it. Listen to the last several sentences of that address with that in mind.

*And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you-  
ask what you can do for your country.*

*My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you,  
but what together we can do for the freedom of man.*

*Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us  
the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a  
good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our  
deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help,  
but knowing here on Earth God’s work must truly be our own.<sup>i</sup>*

Here on Earth God’s work must truly be our own. Whether or not you think it is appropriate to use such language in an Inaugural Address, if you think about it, that is a profoundly Christian statement. The Holy Spirit is what allows us to make God’s work our own here on Earth.

We talk a lot about making God’s work our own here at Immanuel. We usually do that by going down a list of opportunities to serve others through our outreach - our work with the Dreamers, the volunteering that people do at Chesterbrook, taking tags off the Tag Tree, making sandwiches for the Bologna Bunch, our International Mission in places like Honduras and Peru.

The Nominating Committee has asked me today to focus not on outreach but our “inreach.” So let me suggest that:

† *the Spirit might just be calling you to serve on the Worship Committee, not for the sake of preserving an institution, but to be about the vital work of providing an opportunity for others to be immersed in the stories of our faith and in the praise of God.*

† *The Spirit might just be calling you to say “yes” to making coffee and providing treats for Fellowship Hour, and even staying after service to help clean up. And the Spirit might help you to say “yes” to it not simply because it is a job that has to be done, but because hospitality is an important spiritual discipline - it is important to create space for others to feel welcome.*

† *Perhaps the Spirit is calling you to be an elder or a committee chair - not just because it is a slot that has to be filled, but because you know that the church needs spiritual leaders. Or maybe*

† *the Spirit is calling you to knit prayer shawls, or to send cards, or to visit people in the hospital or in their homes.*

There are all sorts of ways God’s work becomes our own.

One of my favorite stories about the Holy Spirit and how God’s work becoming our own is one that Tom Long tells. Let me share it with you now as I close.

He writes, *“Once I was with a church group in which people were asked to talk about times in their lives when God was close and real. One of the group was a young woman who was a dancer in a professional ballet company. When it came time for her to speak, it was clear that she was more comfortable as a dancer than as a speaker.*

*“She reminded the group that she was raised in that particular church. She described the sanctuary, including the baptismal font, and she said that she was baptized as an infant right in that very font. She did not remember this, of course, but she told us that her father was very proud of that moment and that when she was a little girl, he would often tell her of the Sunday that she was baptized. He would describe the baptismal dress that she wore, he would remember the hymns that were sung and what the minister had said in the sermon, and he always ended the story by clapping his hands together and exclaiming, “Oh, sweetheart, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!”*

*She then said that as a child, she would go to worship on Sunday with her parents and would wonder, “Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?” She would look at the brass organ pipes, at the rafters in the ceiling, and at the stained-glass windows, and she would wonder, “Is that where the Holy Spirit is in this church?”*

*Then she paused for a moment, and everybody in the room leaned forward to hear what she would say next. “As many of you know,” she continued, “I lost both of my parents to cancer in the same week, a terrible week, last winter. During that awful week, on a dark Wednesday afternoon, I was driving*

*home from visiting my parents in the hospital, and I was passing by the church. I felt an intense need to pray, and so I came into the church and sat in one of the back pews and began to pray. The church was dark, and in the shadows, I prayed and poured out my grief to God, and cried from the bottom of my heart. "A member of the church," and she named her, "was in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting, and she saw me praying and knew what was happening in my life. She took off her apron, came and sat beside me in the pew, held my hand, and prayed with me. It was then," the young woman said, "that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church."<sup>ii</sup>*

Immanuel, we know where the Holy Spirit is. It is in us.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>i</sup> It is possible to find the text of John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address at any number of websites.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004), pp. 127-128.