

## **Baptized In The Spirit**

### **Acts 19:1-7**

While Apollos was in Corinth,

Paul passed through the interior regions  
and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

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.”

Then he said, “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,

and they spoke in tongues and prophesied

altogether there were about twelve of them.

# **Baptized In The Spirit**

Acts 19:1-7

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## **I.**

I would like to begin today, and the year, with an obvious question: have you made any New Year's resolutions this past week? If you have, you are to be applauded; if only for taking a moment to step back, even a little, to consider where change might be needed in one's life or, at the very least, helpful. Would anyone like to share their resolution. if they feel comfortable doing so?

While we are certainly free to make a change anytime we wish or need, having a particular moment or occasion when one is encouraged to do so can prove particularly helpful to some folks. Such is the purpose and value of ritual, that is, a proscribed or accepted practice which is often found or expressed in sacred practice or religious observation as part of one's faith, piety, worship or discipleship. Which is exactly what we do every Sunday morning when we gather for worship; either in-person or via the live stream.

## **II.**

Ritual, though, can also be found peppered throughout our normal, everyday lives. More than actions and endeavors which arise from mere habit, rituals are tangible and physical acts which are imbued with significance and meaning; either symbolic or literal. Like singing the National Anthem at sporting events, raising a toast, saying the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of the school day, lighting and blowing out candles on our birthday, graduation ceremonies, fireworks on the 4th of July, and observing a moment of silence in honor of those who have died or given their lives in sacrifice. While often long-standing almost by definition, rituals can both flower and fade over time. The emergence of "Gender Reveal" parties would be an example of the former, while an example of the latter is the slow disappearance of any form of death rituals in our society. Which, to me, is greatly lamentable and a profound loss of opportunity.

### III.

It is hard to move through the experience of the death of a loved one when there is no ritual, no structure or process for doing so; such as calling hours, funeral or memorial services, and having people gather to remember, celebrate, and share a meal or libation. Over the past few years of ministry one of the most important things I find myself saying over and over again in hospital rooms and at the bedside is that good things happen at the end of life, but only if we allow the space, time and opportunity for them.

Rituals are important not because they represent some kind of adherence to social norms, but because we are intentionally setting aside the time to participate in, and open ourselves up to, those people and things which we deem to *be* valuable, or in which we might *find* value. Another way to say this, is that ritual “makes the moment.”

### IV.

Though I certainly can appreciate the practice of setting a New Year’s resolution, throughout the course of my own life I have tended to *not* participate in this particular ritual; except for this year. Less as a starting point for change, and more as a way to understand and name the current convergence of several streams of change in my life which seem to be coming together organically, my resolution for 2024 is this: to endeavor to be more “weirdly observant.” That is, to both observe things in ways which are different, unusual, or not as obvious and, at the same time, to be more observant of “the weird” which is at work in the world.

Which, in large part, explains why we have this passage from Acts 19:1-7 set before us today as our sermon text. This first Sunday following Christmastide, traditionally understood as the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, is given over to the celebration and exploration of the occasion when Jesus arrives, literally, out of nowhere to stand before John to be baptized by him.

### V.

In keeping with my New Year’s resolution to be “weirdly observant,” I have is a rather weird observation for you. *Yesterday* was Epiphany, a longstanding “Feast Day” in the Christian liturgical year celebrating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. Contrary

to popular belief, and a countless number of creches, the Magi *missed* the whole baby in a manger thing, catching up with him some months later. *Today*, at the Baptism of the Lord, another “Feast Day,” we recognize how the Spirit descended upon Jesus and a voice from heaven proclaims him to be the “Beloved,” the “Son” in whom God is well-pleased. Here’s the weird thing, if the Epiphany occurs when Jesus is a few months old, and his baptism when he is around 27, it means that in the span of the past 24 hrs. the biblical narrative completely elides over the majority of Jesus’ life with the exception of one story of his visit to the temple as a lad, as if the rest never happened or doesn’t matter. Like I said, weird.

## VI.

Rather than preaching today on the Baptism of Jesus, though, I have selected the Acts passage specifically because it gives us a perspective *on* baptism which is different, unusual, and not as obvious; that is to say, weird. Here, we find Paul visiting Ephesus where he happens upon some disciples and, of course, they get to talking. Paul asks them if they received the Holy Spirit when they came believers? To which they respond (and I love this) that they haven’t even *heard* of the Spirit! What Spirit!?! This is all news to them!

Paul then asks the next logical question, because as is the case for us today, for the early church faith in Christ begins with the ritual of baptism “Into *what* then *where* you baptized?” Their answer? “*John’s* baptism.” Now this is where it gets weird because, seemingly, there are two *different* kinds of baptism: John’s baptism, a baptism of repentance, or a baptism done in “the name of the Lord Jesus,” which serves to impart the Holy Spirit. Huh?

## VII.

Wait, though, it gets weirder still. Apparently, at least in this instance, having received the Holy Spirit these folks were *immediately* able to speak in tongues and prophecy. Given the importance of Baptism both in our church and to our faith, I am thinking we might want to “unpack” all of this a bit; especially given it is Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

We begin by acknowledging that the practice of baptism began not with John or Jesus, but goes way back in Judaism as articulated in the book of Leviticus. There, ceremonial washing was a purification rite which fulfilled the purity requirements so that Jews could sacrifice at the Temple. Being very

much aware of this practice, John picked up the ball and ran with it such that his became a baptism of repentance. Now, remember, contrary to current connotations of guilt, remorse and confession, the original meaning of the word “repentance” is to turn from, or to make a change. Which, to John’s way of thinking, was a first step towards the forgiveness of sin.

## **VIII.**

Given this, our passage from Acts begins to make a little more sense. With the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the numbers of those who came believe began to grow and so, too, did their theological understanding as to the nature and extent of the Gospel. Which, of course, is where the Apostle Paul came in. Here in this passage we see Paul moving the message forward.

At first, baptism was a kind of ritual cleansing and purification of the body which called people to make a change; later, when done in the name of Christ baptism also becomes a sacrament of grace which imparted the gift of the Holy Spirit to the believer; both for the early church, and for us today. Though it was clearly the case that for those 12 believers in Ephesus there were two distinct baptismal rituals, one of repentance and purification and one of the Spirit, moving forward Paul later makes the case for One Baptism which is what we both celebrate today and have adopted as proper practice.

## **IX.**

At the beginning of today’s sermon we talked about the role and value of ritual in general terms; that ritual “makes the moment.” In what we now hold to be the One Baptism, not only do we “make the moment” by the change we make *to* our lives in offering ourselves for baptism, the “moment will also make us” and bring change *in* our very selves through having been baptized. While it is true the water of baptism is understood, symbolically, to wash us clean from the outside in, the Spirit received at baptism is understood, literally, to change us from the inside out. As I explained and demonstrated to the kids this morning, the Greek word for baptism is “baptizo,” with the root of this word actually meaning something akin to “pickling”: a process of preservation and transformation that occurs *over time* which changes the essential nature of the thing being pickled (i.e, you and I).

## **X.**

At last, now, we come to the weirdest observation of all. In Acts we read: “When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”

I did a quick count on my computer and, so far as I can tell, I have officiated the baptism of over 100 men, women, and children. Not a *one* of them began to speak in tongues or prophecy. Now, I’m certainly willing to admit that I do not possess anywhere near the “mojo” of the Apostle Paul, but it does beg an interesting and, yes, weird question: how does the Spirit each of us has received at our baptism manifest and make itself known? The answer, I believe, is slowly and over time.

## **XI.**

As is my habit, and as I have shared with you before, I enjoy making soup once a week to help get through the winter (this weekend it was beef-barley). One thing I have learned, regardless of the soup, it is *always* better the next day. The bite of some ingredients soften, while the taste of all the ingredients, together, become bolder. The flavors intensify, meld together, and deepen, making something which is richer, fuller, and heartier; and, there is no way to reproduce this, or to cause this to occur through any means other than the passage of time.

Which is exactly the kind of thing I have seen occurring here at our church over the past 25 years, and in every single one of us. We have each been baptized in the Spirit and it is changing us from the inside out, preserving us such that we become better the next day; deeper, bolder and, certainly, much more hearty than when we first were made. Amen.