

The Baptism of Our Lord --- January 13, 2013 --- Luke 3:15-17,21-22
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Billy Strayhorn, the Pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Groesbeck Texas tells the story of a Sunday School teacher who taught her class to recite the Apostles Creed by giving each child one phrase to learn. At the Sunday School presentations, the class was asked to give their recitation. They began beautifully.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," said the first child.

"I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord", said the next. And so it went perfectly until they came to the child who said, "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty: from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead".

At that point an embarrassed silence fell until a little girl spoke up and said, "Uh, the little boy who believes in the Holy Spirit is absent today."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying: "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and Fire."

Today for the first time this year we meet the adult Jesus Christ, after the four weeks of Advent preparation, two weeks of the Incarnation and the coming of the Magi . In Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, we heard the stories of Jesus birth, it's preparation and fulfillment. Mark and John both begin the story of Jesus with John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus. It is significant that Jesus begins his public life with baptism. Gathered around him is a crowd waiting in eager anticipation for John to end his preaching and to watch others, or perhaps themselves, enter and be immersed in the Jordan River. In this spirit, people enter the river, and Jesus joins them. Only John and Jesus know something out of the ordinary is about to happen. Something of earth shattering significance is about to take place.

An Australian Priest named John Honner explains this as a 'volcano theory of the sacraments" Although we are rarely aware of it, he says, we walk around on the surface of the earth, oblivious to the hot magna that seethes not far beneath our feet. Only when this lava erupts in volcanic form do we become aware of what has been there all along. So it is with the presence of God: we ignore that power and depth most of the time. The sacraments bring it to our consciousness. "

God through John the Baptist called the Jewish people to turn from their evil ways, to become remade, reformed, and changed by the baptism of the water of repentance. But this was not to be an end in itself, but the preparation for God's son who would baptism with

water and the Spirit. And what a difference invoking the name of the Holy Spirit had, not only upon Jesus himself, but for his followers as well.

"Now when the disciples at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit - for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."

My friends - when Peter and John laid their hands on the disciples in Samaria and prayed for them - they did so for a reason - they did so because they saw the believers in Samaria hadn't yet encountered the transforming and energizing power of the Holy Spirit.

And when Peter and John touched the believers of Samaria and prayed for them - something happened. Something that was visible. Something that was obviously powerful and effective - so much so that Simon the Magician offered the disciples money if they could grant him the same power of touch that they had.

Two thousand years later we don't know exactly what happened in Samaria - but we can guess a bit about what happened from what continues to happen today --- when believers assemble together and pray for one another that the Spirit might come upon them and that God himself might minister unto them.

Tears flow, laughter is heard, hands are raised in holy praise, wounds are healed, fears dismissed, and joy and peace is written upon every heart and every face.

In short - when Jesus baptizes a person with the Holy Spirit and fire - faith moves from here - in the head - to here - in the heart - and it makes it everything different from what it was before. People can and are changed.

As God used his Son to make himself real to others - so God uses us to help keep this reality alive. Each of us possesses many gifts. When we gather here in worship, or downstairs in fellowship, God calls us to exercise our ministry of the Holy Spirit in this place - Each one of us can bring the gift of the Holy Spirit to another person -
- by our touch, - by our laying on of hands, - by our prayer
- by our personal concern and care for them.

In this way we can help other sense the presence of the Lord within their hearts, within their lives, and in doing so, the Lord become even more real in our lives too.

Let us Pray: Make O God your Holy Spirit real with us
Make O God your Holy Spirit real within our brothers and sisters
that we and they may know your power
and rejoice in your complete and total care. Amen

Credits: Billy Strayhorn "Passing On The Flame" in The Abingdon Preaching Annual 1995 Edition, for the opening story. John Honner (Living the Good News, Worship Kit 6 pg. 35 Winter 1995)
Richard Fairchild, www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/year-c-sermons.php