

"Holy Surprise!"

Gen. 1:1-5; Ps. 29; Acts 19:1-7
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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I have to confess that there are times I wish I was in a church where prophecy and speaking in tongues were regular features of the worship life. If there was ever a question about whether someone was filled with the Spirit or not or whether God was really present, hearing prophecy or speaking in tongues would certainly settle things.

It's much harder when the gifts of the Spirit are more subtle, less easily recognized and not lifted up in the same way.

Proving authenticity in worship and in one's spiritual life is an age-old problem. How do we know God is really "here"? We are always on the lookout for some sign, some signal, some celestial "wink" that will reassure us and lift our spirits and prove to us that God is real and is with us.

Perhaps it was their lack of speaking in tongues and prophesying that made Paul ask if the disciples in Ephesus had received the Holy Spirit in baptism. As it turned out, they hadn't even heard of the Holy Spirit - - which in itself is remarkable, if in fact these were Christ's disciples. It was a surprise to them.

Christ's gift to his disciples was that they would receive power from on high and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. On the mountain he told his disciples to teach the faith and to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So one has to wonder what happened with these believers in Ephesus and what they really did believe.

It's possible they came to believe because of the powerful preaching of a man named Apollos, who had been in Ephesus just before Paul. We find out in the chapter just before today's reading that Apollos only knew about the baptism of John.

When two of Paul's converts, a man named Aquila and his wife Priscilla, heard Apollos preach they took him aside to explain the faith to him more accurately. It's quite likely that when Paul got to Ephesus they filled him in on what had happened. This might help to explain why Paul asks them about their baptisms and the Holy Spirit.

Paul makes a point of rebaptizing them and then when he lays hands on them they prophesy and speak in tongues, two undeniable markers of the presence of the Spirit.

But is this how the gift of the Holy Spirit is supposed to manifest itself at baptism? Did Jesus speak in tongues at his own baptism? It's not recorded that Jesus said anything. Later, when the Day of Pentecost arrived, that Day on which the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they spoke in foreign languages, those who gathered around heard the preaching of Peter and asked: "What must we do to be saved?" not "Where did that speaking in tongues come from?"

And what was Peter's response? "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (So far, that sounds remarkably similar to John the Baptist's preaching, close to the 1st baptism of these Ephesus disciples). But Peter continues, "And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and your children."

For us and for our children... This gift of baptism in the name of Jesus is baptism in the Holy Spirit, regardless of our age. Baptism marks us as part of God's family of faith. We have been born into a spiritual

community and are God's children. It goes far beyond the manifestations of prophecy and tongues. It touches each one of us in a unique way.

Needless to say, there are times when we experience a heightened awareness of the presence of the Holy. There are times when we sense God is very close to us, times when we may be up on the proverbial mountaintop. At times like those, our infant baptism or perhaps even our baptism at a later age may seem rather dull, rather flat by comparison.

Or, have you ever had someone question your devotion to Christ simply because you hadn't prophesied in their hearing or uttered some unintelligible language of ecstatic worship or done something else that fit their definition of "spiritual"?? Have you gotten into conversation with other Christians who don't believe in infant baptism, but only a believer's baptism or a baptism of the Holy Spirit and you come away from it with more questions than answers?

Perhaps not, but my guess is, from time to time we have all wondered about the sincerity of the religious devotion of others, especially when the behaviors we observe in them seem to run counter to the teachings of Christ.

We may have wondered about our own faith, especially when it seems to be so "ordinary" when compared to the faith of others around us. We may be led to think we are missing something because those "other gifts" of the Spirit seem to have passed us by. It is so easy for us to be score-keepers at everything and faith experience is no exception. ("I'll see your 3 hours of charity work and raise you 4 prayer meetings...")

But before we begin to develop low spiritual self-esteem, we must remember that baptism is God's work, not ours. In baptism we each have received spiritual gifts. The gifts of the Spirit we receive are unique to our personality and our purpose in God's plan.

Baptism is a beginning of a deeper walk with God, not the end of the journey. It's a process of development and discovery. And whether or not I choose to exercise my gifts, they are still there, present in my life. William Willimon put it this way:

"When I was born, I was given all of my natural endowments. I possessed within my body all the genetic characteristics which I would have for the rest of my life. My hands may be the hands of a great concert pianist. I do not know, because I have never tried to develop my hands for the piano. Likewise, at my birth at baptism, I have been given all the spiritual endowments which I will ever have. They are mine, not as possessions or achievements but, like my natural endowments, as gifts of God. I have developed, enjoyed, used, and shared some of those gifts. Many have not even been discovered by me yet".

Each and every day we must live out our baptism and live into it as well. Each and every day we are called to renew our baptism vows, to remember that we are claimed by God and gifted by the Spirit for particular tasks of ministry, our unique ministry.

Do not doubt that the one who has brooded and hovered over the face of the waters and called order into the chaos of life in Genesis is also hovering over you in anticipation that you will hear the voice and understand your calling to live into the name "Christian", filled with all the grace and hope and love of God that you need to be a transformed and transforming presence in the world around you. Amen.