

## “Holy What Now?”

### Sermon – January 7, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

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That which unites us, divides us. I have mentioned this before but the irony is all Christians—by our very name—believe in Jesus Christ, but we disagree—sometimes vehemently and even violently—on sacraments and polity. That is, what are sacred acts and how do we govern ourselves.

These differences are why we have all the branches and denominations of churches that we do.

Sacraments are particular liturgical—worship—practices of churches. They are “signs” and “seals”—signs of God’s gracious promise and seals of God’s life-giving Word. They are an outward sign instituted by God to convey an inward or spiritual grace.

A few—like the Quakers—have no sacraments. Roman Catholics, at the other end, have seven. Most Protestants have two, baptism and communion, because they are rooted with Jesus specifically.

But even on these two most fundamental ones there is disagreement on their meaning and how to conduct them. Of the two, communion we practice regularly but baptism only once—depending. More on that later.

And today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, the first Sunday after Epiphany, as is the practice of most western churches.

Epiphany, which was only yesterday, commemorates the Magi coming from the east to honor the “child who has been born king of the Jews” and is the celebration of God’s manifestation or self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ.

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The Baptism of Jesus takes place about 30 years later when Jesus is an adult and marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and confirms his identity as the Son of God.

But what kind of baptism was it?

In Judaism they did not have baptism per se but did have different cleaning rituals. We think of cleaning to get rid of germs but, of course, they had no such concept. They were cleaning from various things that defiled a person to be made ritually pure and some did so frequently.

John preached a different type of cleaning, which in Greek was called *baptizó* [bap-TID-zo] from which we get our word “baptize.”

As the beginning of today’s gospel passage from Mark 1:4 says, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

This baptism was done once because it was not a ritual cleaning of the outside of the body but a cleaning of the inside, the inward nature of the person. It was repenting—turning away from sin by changing your heart, mind, and behavior, and being forgiven. It was a recognition that how you treat others was by extension how you treat God.

John goes on to say one more powerful than him was coming and, in verse 8, that, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Sometime later, Jesus shows up. John baptizes Jesus in the River Jordan, then verses 10 and 11 say, “and just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a

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dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’”

Now people ask, “If Jesus was without sin, then why did he undertake John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?”

Jesus’ baptism served as a sign to John, and future generations of believers, that he was the Messiah. It was an act of solidarity with humanity to help us repent and receive forgiveness of sins.

Most importantly, Jesus received the Holy Spirit and, thus, he can give it to those who believe in him, fulfilling John’s promise.

This sets us up for what is happening in the second lesson today from Acts 19. As a bit of context, there was a variety of teachings and practices to be found among early Christian communities and they came through different people. Some were ardent preachers of Jesus, but had received the information second-hand, so were off a bit on the details.

Paul sees this when he comes to Ephesus, but as we heard in today’s lesson, he doesn’t browbeat them—he listens, he has a dialogue. He assumes good intentions and seeks first to understand.

The key element for Paul was the living presence of God in the life of the believers. So, Paul’s first question to the believers is not “how were you baptized?” but “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” Paul “question behind the question” is “Do they live their lives aware of, open to, filled with, and guided by the Spirit of God?”

Their response was, essentially, “Holy what now?” They knew about Jesus, but were missing something. They thought John’s baptism was it. They were trying to trying to be believers on their own.

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It is good and necessary to say, “I repent and I believe,” but you can’t save yourself. You need to add, “God send your spirit to help me to do so.” When Paul explains it, they readily accept it and as verses 5 and 6 say, “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.”

This passage stands as one of the classic battlegrounds for debates over baptism: whether people should be re-baptized, whether water baptism is enough or if the baptism of the Holy Spirit is required as well, or whether prophecy and/or speaking in tongues are necessary elements of what it takes to be a true believer.

That is a subject for a class by itself. Suffice to say, we as Presbyterians believe in one baptism—in any Christian church regardless of denomination—is sufficient and that the Spirit is present whether outwardly shown or not. And, as Paul writes in Corinthians, that prophesying or speaking in tongues is not necessary, though certainly nothing wrong with it.

Regardless of how or where we were baptized, though, how is our life in the Spirit now? How are we living out our baptism now?

I’m sure, like me, most of you wouldn’t have minded a little rush of wind or tongues of flame when you were baptized or, frankly, at any time.

But ultimately our life in Christ is not just about any particular event that might have taken place whether in the early or later days of our faith. Those moments -- if and when they happen -- are gifts from God to be treasured, but they constitute starting points, not ending points

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With the Holy Spirit we can and do prophesy and speak in tongues.

Perhaps not as demonstratively as they did in Acts, but in our own ways in our everyday lives.

For example, speaking to truth to power when that power is immoral or causing pain for other.

Prophesying—literally, speaking God’s message—of love and using it to heal people and mend relationships.

And doing so in a constructive way as Paul did. Engage with people, not talk at people. As Ted Lasso said, “Be curious, not judgmental.”

We were baptized in faith and we live out that baptism in faith.

Faith is a response to God’s call. Faith is what baptism imparts to us.

Through the Holy Spirit, in baptism we are given the faith of Jesus.

The presence in this world of Christ’s faith is the church, both as individuals and as a community of faith—for baptism is more than an individual act. In baptism we become part of a people.

What baptism means for us continues to unfold. It always follows faith

Baptism opens our hearts and our minds to becoming instruments that bring unity and peace to our neighbors.

All this is the possibility of hopefulness for a new beginning that God forges as his community comes together with whatever they have and whoever they are, to encourage one another and others to make the journey of discipleship.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.