

The Spirit Swept Over the Waters

Genesis 1: 1-5

Mark 1: 4-11

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Genesis 1: 1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1: 4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The church where my children were baptized and grew up had a wonderful baptism tradition. Long before Monique and Justin were born, a member of the congregation had traveled to the Holy Land and had brought back a small bottle of water from the River Jordan. At each baptism there was a special ritual in which a single drop of the Jordan water was added to the water in the baptismal font. We all know the liturgy of baptism as we hear the message that we are baptized with Christ into his death and resurrection, yet it was a deeper experience to celebrate a baptism with even a drop of water from the same river.

The words and the actions of the ritual created a clear mental image of John the Baptist dipping Jesus under the river water, and Jesus rising up to see the heavens ripped open as the Spirit descended like a dove on him and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

By the time my children were born and baptized, the original River Jordan water was long gone, but the tradition carried on as the bottle was refilled with town tap water with a sense of the essence of the original water still present. The meaning and the ritual were just as rich. Years later when they were confirmed through the affirmation of their baptism, they were reminded of the water of Jesus' baptism that had once touched their foreheads and begun their faith journey into the body of Christ, into the church. Then they claimed for themselves what had

been promised by parents and godparents. And they did as we all have done at our Confirmation, we confirm that our baptism was not just a single event in our life. It was just the beginning of our participation in the life and the mission of the Church. Our baptisms wait for fulfillment. Pastor and author Brett Younger writes that, “ We are handed a map, but we have to take the trip. It takes our whole life to finish our baptisms. All of our days are commentary on our baptisms. Repentance, conversion, and growth are a lifelong process. Just as Jesus’ life gave meaning to his baptism, so our baptisms wait to be given meaning through each of our lives. In the waters of baptism, Jesus heard the Spirit calling him to speak the truth and live with grace. Jesus was true to the voice. Jesus gave everything— his days and nights, his hopes and dreams, his work and his life itself. Jesus gave himself to God’s people—sharing, listening, and ministering. When Jesus cried on the cross, “It is finished,” it was his baptism that was complete.”

When Martin Luther was tempted to give up on following Christ, he would sit in his study and recite, almost as a mantra, “I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized.”

The water of baptism—whether or not it came from the River Jordan—first flowed at the beginning of creation. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The Spirit of God that swept over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation descended upon Jesus as he came up out of the River Jordan. The same voice that said, “Let there be light” at the beginning of time delighted in Jesus’ baptism, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

Retreat Leader Linnae Peterson reminds us that in Hebrew, wind and breath and spirit are all one word: ru’ach. The ru’ach of God blows at the start of all things. It blows at Pentecost, transforming the frightened disciples into powerful emissaries of Christ. And that Holy Spirit of God blows in us.

Just as the newly-baptized Jesus saw the heavens as a ripped-open sky, baptism means that God has broken through; and so we, in turn, are called to tear into the challenges and problems of the world with everything we’ve been given.

What did it mean when you were baptized? While most of us were baptized as infants the experience of the sacrament itself is beyond our memory, but the question is more about how your baptism is being fulfilled.

How you have traveled with the map that you were handed?

How are you grateful today for the grace of God?

What are some things you have you done that you probably would not have done if you had not been baptized?

As our baptisms begin a process of fulfillment so that our days are a commentary on our baptism, let us now renew our baptismal vows. *

Introduction

Our God created new life forms and brought them up from the waters of chaos, embraced them, and called them good. Jesus, baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, became living water for us and embraces all of us.

Jesus embraces those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized and all others who come seeking. We follow Jesus with our Baptism, marking a starting place for new life and new ways of being. We join Jesus in love and service. Let us prepare our hearts and minds to see, feel, and hear again the vows of Baptism.

Renewal of Baptismal Promises

Do you renew and affirm the promises made at your Baptism?

People: I do.

Do you recognize the call of God to be God's people always?

I do.

Do you embrace the way of Jesus in faith and ministry?

I do

Do you accept the nurture of the Holy Spirit who renews your spirit each day?

I do.

Do you accept and embrace others who seek a liberating faith in God?

I do.

In renewing your baptismal vows, remember your Baptism as a mark of acceptance and welcome into the care of Christ's church where you may begin again your Christian faith and life.

A Unison Prayer:

O God, we rejoice in your grace, given and received.

We thank you that you claim us,

that you wash us, strengthen us, and guide us,

that you empower us to live a life worthy of our calling.

In the way of Jesus, make us as water in a dry and thirsty world.

Establish us to be places of refreshment.

Root us and nurture us in love,

that with all your people, that we may rightly and justly serve you.

Fill us with your fullness

that our lives may overflow in service and love. Amen.

* <https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/baptism-of-christ-epiphany-1-year-b-january-10-2021/>