

“Drenched in the Spirit”

Acts 19:1-7

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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.

In Assy, France, there is a church famed for its twentieth century art. Not far from Chamonix, the Church of Notre-Dame De Toute Grâce stands on a mountainside facing Mont Blanc. It was constructed between 1937 and 1945. Hmmm. During World War II.

In 1939, a Dominican friar named Father Couturier began commissioning the best and most extreme moderns he could find to embellish the church. All I can say is he must have had some kind of building fund!

He brought together some of the very best artists of the time: Braque, Matisse, Bonnard, Rouault, Léger, Bazaine, Chagall, among others.¹

As was common in traditional church architecture, the Church of Notre-Dame was constructed with a baptistery. This baptistery is graced with two magnificent stained glass windows that depict the Exodus. These windows were created by Marc Chagall.² In one window, an angel

¹ This information found in [idlespeculations-terryprest.blogspot.com/ 2007](http://idlespeculations-terryprest.blogspot.com/2007)

² It is the very first window commission Chagall had in the 1930s.

hovers over the waters. The angel's head morphs into a body that looks like a candelabra. It's one of those fantastic images Chagall is so well known for. Chagall windows, as you may well know, are often cast in vivid jewel tones. They combine both abstract and realistic imagery. They are are breathtaking to behold.

In spite of my best efforts exploring *Google* images, I was unable to call up a full image of this set of windows, so I rely on a description provided by Gail Ramshaw:

“Moses is holding back Pharaoh and his chariots; an angel is leading the people safely across the sea toward the cross of Christ. It is a stunning piece, with the Jewish artist. . .telling the Jewish story [in a Christian setting]. The Chagall, nearly overwhelming the visitor with its symbolic power, dwarfs a singularly unimpressive font, a small bowl on a pedestal designed for cute infants in white ruffles. The Exodus painting tells of ancient times, the violent destruction of evil, glorious visions from God and the mystery of the cross. The font tells of a 1950s French baby being christened.”³

In this striking contrast between two symbols of baptism (the one recalling the great power of God, the other, a tiny bird-bath of a font), we have a visual entrée into the two kinds of baptism depicted in our scripture lesson this morning.

There is the baptism of John and there is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of John is by definition something human, a human effort to call people to repentance. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is something else entirely.

The book of Acts is drenched with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit shows up at least forty times in this first account of the Christian church. People are filled with the Holy Spirit; Peter and Paul and others are struck with the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit gives power to preach and to heal and to prophesy. The Holy Spirit has everyone speaking in tongues in one place and others able to simultaneously understand a message in their own native tongue in another. The Holy Spirit is all over the place in the book of Acts. This is in contrast to only twenty-seven times in all four gospels combined---and most of the gospel appearances of the spirit occur around the birth and baptism of Jesus.

It makes sense that the Holy Spirit is so active in Acts. First, there was Jesus' promise. Right before he leaves them, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples: “And I will ask the Father, and he

³ Gail Ramshaw, Words Around the Font, p. 3

will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-17, NIV)

Second, there is the fact that the church simply could not have happened, would not have begun, grown, or survived without the constant action of the Holy Spirit. So of course the early church was drenched in the Spirit. We know this Spirit was of God, because it could not be stopped. It never has been.

It is interesting to contrast John's "baptism of repentance" with the "baptism of the Spirit." But more than just interesting, it is important to consider how they are different; it was obviously important to the scriptural writers.

Although it is a somewhat arbitrary distinction, the baptism of repentance is often considered as *our efforts to turn toward God*. The accent is on human action, both in the ritual of baptism and in the action of turning one's life around. The accent is on good works and strong faith, rather than on grace.

But a baptism of the spirit? Being drenched in the spirit of God? Now we are talking about an entirely different thing! We are talking about a new world---different from the structures and the systems we create for ourselves. We are talking about something outside human control, maybe even outside human awareness. One writer put it this way, "God's spirit is not a tame dove but a wild goose, free of ecclesiastical attempts to control and confine it. . ." ⁴

The baptism of the spirit reminds us human action is never enough. Human striving is never sufficient. Just 'taking care of business' never really works to transform our lives and make them whole. It takes more. It takes the Holy Spirit.

Fred Craddock tells a story from when he and his wife served a tiny church in a tiny little town in Oklahoma. Custer City, OK. "The population was about 450 on a good day," he says. "Each of [the four churches in town] had its share of the population, and on Wednesday nights and Sunday, each church had a small collection of young people. The attendance rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the wheat."

"The best and most consistent attendance in town, however, was at

⁴ Elizabeth Stuart, in Images in the Lectionary, Year B.

the little café where all the pickup trucks were parked and all the men were inside discussing the weather and the cattle and the wheat bugs, while their wives and sons and daughters were in one of those four churches.”

I am thinking of L. A. Fitness on a Sunday morning, or a nice day at White Rock Lake, or maybe the regular Sunday brunch crowd at Lake Highlands Cafe. It’s the same here, isn’t it? Church can have good attendance or poor attendance based on a number of factors (including what time the Cowboys are playing), but these other places of gathering have consistently good attendance, rain or shine. Better attendance than most churches. . . Back to Fred’s story. . .

“Once in a while they would lose a member there at the café because his wife finally got to him, or maybe his kids did. So you would see him go off sheepishly to one of the churches. But the men at the café still felt that they were the biggest and strongest group in town, and so they met on Wednesdays and Sundays and every other day to discuss the weather and such. They were not bad men. Indeed, they were good men, family men, hard-working men.”

“The patron saint of the group at the café was Frank. Frank was seventy-seven years old when I met him. He was a good man. . .he had been born in a sod house, and he had prospered. [His buddies at the café said, “Old Frank will never go to church.”]

“One day I met Frank on the street, and he knew I was a preacher. It has never been my custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so I just shook hands and visited with Frank. Then he took the offensive. He said, “I work hard and I take care of my family and I mind my own business.” He said that as far as he was concerned, everything else is fluff. He was telling me, “Leave me alone; I’m not a prospect.”

“So I did not bother Frank. That is why I was surprised, indeed the church was surprised and the whole town was surprised and the men at the café church were absolutely bumfuzzled, when old Frank, seventy-seven years old, presented himself before me one Sunday morning for baptism. I baptized Frank. Some in the community said that Frank must be sick, said he must be scared to meet his maker. Some said, “He’s got heart trouble, going up to be baptized. I never thought old Frank would do that, but I guess when you get scared. . .” There were all kinds of stories. But this is the way Frank told it to me. We were talking the day after his baptism and I said, “Frank, do you remember that little saying you used to give me so much? ‘I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business?’”

“He said, “Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot.”
“Do you still say that?” I asked.
“Yes,” he said,
“Then what’s the difference?”
He said, “I didn’t know then what my business was.”

He discovered what his business was. It was to serve human need. So I baptized Frank. “Upon your confession of faith in Jesus Christ and in obedience to his command, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

“Do you remember that? Do you remember that?”⁵

As today you remember your own baptism, let go and let God. Let yourself be drenched in the Spirit. Remember that baptism is not a human act; but the Spirit’s business. Remember, in the words of Martin Luther, every day every one of us is “creeping back to Baptism.”

As we approach a small, rather unimpressive font, remember this is not what’s important. It is the spirit that drenches us, not the water.

Remember that. Remember that.

⁵ Fred C. Craddock, The Cherry Log Sermons, pp. 11-12.