

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
January 9, 2022 – The Baptism of our Lord  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

For Luke, to speak of the Holy Spirit was to speak of the presence of the divine. In his account of the good news of Jesus Christ, Luke describes many people as “filled with the Holy Spirit.” But Jesus was unique in being conceived by the Holy Spirit and in receiving the Holy Spirit in bodily form at his baptism. After being baptized in water by John, Jesus was praying and “the heaven was opened.” This phrase, “the heaven was opened,” signifies a direct divine revelation. The people hearing Luke’s Gospel would have been reminded of the prophet Isaiah’s appeal to God in these words: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” or of Ezekiel’s description of divine revelation which began with the words, “the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1). Luke wants us to understand that the people present at Jesus’ baptism witnessed God’s direct revelation.

If you have ever wondered why there are so many doves in Christian art, the baptism of Jesus is the answer. The dove has become the primary symbol of the Holy Spirit because it was written that “the Holy Spirit descended upon [Jesus] in bodily form like a dove.” It wasn’t a real dove, but something was visible, something that came from above, something that moved, something that was “like a dove.” The description is not precise. We must grope for words that approximate our experiences of the divine because they are extraordinary. You may know this from instances in your own life. Can you find words that adequately describe your most profound moments of prayer or your “visions” of the divine or your sense of God’s touch or God’s love? When we try to put these experiences into words, the words fall short; they are “like” what we experienced, but not exactly.

Clearer than the visual experience was what the people heard, the voice of God saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” These words are very similar to those heard at another memorable event in the life of Jesus, the Transfiguration, when for a short while the radiant light of Christ was visible to his disciples and God’s voice was heard to say, “This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!” The New Testament record is clear. Jesus is the beloved Son of God.

When the people questioned John the Baptist as to whether he was the Messiah, John answered, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance and the water symbolized being cleansed from sin, from whatever was contrary to the will of God. Water is a purifying agent, as we know, but fire is much more potent than water as a purifying agent.

“[The Messiah’s] winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” This verse from Luke’s gospel about the chaff being burned with unquenchable fire may disturb us. We need to remember that the primary aim is to save and gather in the wheat, not to burn the chaff. In the context of the offer of forgiveness, the message to repent is good news. The judgment of Christ must be viewed in the context of our salvation through Christ. If we think about it, how could the light of Christ come into the world without being a “judgment” on darkness? We are given the opportunity to accept or reject God, to choose either light or darkness. Ultimately, if we choose the light, whatever may be dark within our souls will be touched by the light and will be darkness

no longer. We will be purified. It may be that some souls will resolutely refuse the light and reject God. Only God knows what will become of them.

John prophesied that the Messiah would baptize people with the Holy Spirit. Luke describes the fulfillment of this promise at the beginning of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. He recounts the words of the risen Christ to his disciples, whom he had instructed to remain in Jerusalem, "This is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." This baptism is the event of Pentecost when Jerusalem was filled with Jews from far and wide and the Holy Spirit came from heaven. The Spirit was described as "a sound like the rush of a violent wind," and as "tongues, as of fire." The Spirit enabled people to speak in languages they did not know. Unsympathetic people who saw all this "sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" The Holy Spirit is like wind and fire. It is inebriating. The Holy Spirit is powerful because it is God at work, from before the beginning of creation and for eternity and now.

Many people, in the writings collected in the Bible and in witness through the centuries since the life of Christ, have described the human experience of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the "Spirit of truth" that leads us to know and confess Christ as our Lord. The Spirit brings us peace, the peace of Christ that passes understanding. The Spirit helps us to pray – to praise God, to pray on behalf of others, to bare our souls to the Lord. The Spirit gives us assurance that we are the beloved children of God, that we belong to God and that nothing can separate us from God. The Spirit gives us strength and comfort, enabling us to bear our burdens and to share the burdens of others. The Spirit comes to us through the Word of scripture and the Sacraments of the church. The Spirit leads us to keep the commandments of God, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. It is through the Holy Spirit that we have faith in Christ and through the Holy Spirit that we grow into the likeness of Christ. As with the wind, we cannot see the Holy Spirit, but we can see its effects.

The Holy Spirit is powerful because it is God at work. The Spirit is powerful, but the Spirit will not overpower us against our will. God gives us the freedom to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in our transformation or to refuse the Spirit. God invites us to be born again, to be born from above, from the Spirit. The invitation is often gentle, but the rebirth we are called to is radical. Each one of us is being called forward into new life. We are called to change, to become ever more like our Lord Jesus. How is God calling you to rebirth, to new life, to deeper faith, to stronger love, to hope and joy? The Holy Spirit is alive and lively and at work in the church, calling us to be a fuller and more authentic expression of Christ, a better witness to Christ in the world. How is the Holy Spirit leading us here and now at St. Columba's?

Let us all pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to live out our faith as it is spoken in this prayer for the church in The Book of Common Prayer (page 528): "O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: ... let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."