

The Big Question

Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11, Acts 19:1-7

January 8, 2012

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And 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.

Genesis 1:1-5 (ESV)

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 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 when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:1-11 (ESV)

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And 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, Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.

Acts 19:1-7 (ESV)

Here we are, only two weeks after Christmas day. It seems like we spend so much time going into Christmas, that which is marked by the time we Christians call "Advent," which means "the coming." But then Christmas gets here, and once it comes, it is gone just like that! Christmas was originally designed to be celebrated not just on one day, but over the course of twelve days, hence the popular Christmas carol, "The Twelve Days of Christmas." But for most of us, Christmas was over some time ago. So, in a way, it seems like a good year to look at the Gospel of Mark. Although we will be looking at lots of different Scripture throughout the year, the main gospel we will be drawing from is Mark's.

Mark doesn't give us anything about the Christmas or Nativity story. He just jumps into Jesus' ministry as an adult, that which started around the age of 29 or 30. Many biblical scholars believe that Mark's gospel was actually the first gospel written and that the other gospel writers just expounded and expanded on Mark's, though we really don't know that for sure.

But even taking all four gospels into account, the Christmas or Nativity story represents just a tiny fraction of what the gospel story is all about. Yes, it is important for us to know that Jesus' coming was the fulfillment of a long awaited prophecy, that He came from the right lineage or blood lines, and that He came to a particular place and people, and most importantly, that we understand that Jesus was, and still is, the promised Messiah – “God with us.” But in the big picture, Jesus' life and ministry, that which covers at the most three years, is what is most important. And when I say ministry, I also mean His death on the cross and resurrection.

Last Sunday Alex gave us a wonderful New Year's message, tying it in with the story of Simeon and Anna in the temple recognizing who the baby Jesus was, the long-awaited Messiah, when his parents Joseph & Mary came to present Him before God. That which was a Jewish requirement. Jewish parents needed to present their first child, that being a boy, back to God. I know it's hard for us to believe today, but girls didn't really count for much back then. It was a different time and a different culture.

As Alex was preaching last Sunday I couldn't help but think that the only two stories that we have of Jesus in all the Bible from the time he was born, until the time he was baptized and began his ministry, are two stories that mark a very significant time in a Jewish male's life. The first being when his parents presented him to the Lord, “as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord.’” And the second, Jesus being in the temple when he was twelve years old, also found in Luke, chapter 2. Twelve years old is a very significant age in the life of a Jewish male. It is thought to be a rite of passage - when a Jewish child passes into the age of maturity. When he can begin to make decisions for himself. It is around the age when a Jewish male celebrates his Bar-mitzvah, a public acknowledgement of the transition.

One very important point that can get lost in all this, especially in our culture today, is the importance of obedience to the commands of God, and how obedience has played a role in the biblical story.

So, we have Jesus, raised by what we would call today, “orthodox” or “traditional” Jewish parents, who were obedient to the commands of God, presenting their child back to God, as was required, after Mary had undergone the 40-45 days of purification, that too which was required, and they also presented a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, “keeping with what was said in the Law of the Lord.” And then we have Jesus, in the temple, around the age of 12, a significant age in an obedient, orthodox, Jewish boy's life, being taken to the temple by his parents for the Feast of the Passover, “according to the custom.”

And now we have this morning, Jesus an adult of around age 30, being baptized in the Jordan River. Another significant rite of passage for Jewish males. Baptism for repentance in water signified the cleansing of one's sins and it was an act that most Jewish men would have been

very familiar with. Repentance was the act of turning from one's sins and turning to God for the forgiveness of those sins. Baptism was the public acknowledgment that the change was already taking place.

The problem with just baptism in water for the forgiveness of sins, after repentance? It lacked the power to change people over the long haul. It was similar to all the sacrifices. As the writer of the Book of Hebrews so aptly points out: "It could never by the same sacrifices, repeated endlessly, year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship (Hebrews 10:1b) and "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Hebrews 10:11). The same was true of baptism in water. The Jewish people would need to come back, over and over again to be cleansed of their sin. But Jesus offered back then, and still offers today, something better. I still come back to the question which I have asked several times before, "Why did Jesus need to be baptized?" Jesus, who was without sin, came to take on our sin. Jesus came to be the one sacrifice which could be acceptable. How important is the act of baptism?

Jesus' last words to his disciples as recorded in the three synoptic gospels:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been give to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Mark 16:16 (NIV)

"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."
Luke 24:46-49 (NIV)

And then some of Peter's first words to the early church:

"Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call."
Acts 2:38-39 (NIV)

Is that promise "just bestowed" upon our children? Because if it is, then we are no different than the Israelites who felt it was bestowed upon their children by birth, or the Roman Catholics who felt it was bestowed upon their children by infant baptism. Both appear to be contrary to what the Scripture teaches overall. At some point each of us needs to accept our faith for our own. What are the steps to salvation, taking most of the New Testament into account?

1. Repentance – the acknowledgement of our own sinfulness and a turning away from our sin and a turning towards God.
2. Baptism in water in the name of Jesus Christ or the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. A public sign that we have repented, turned away from our old sinful life which we were born into, and have turned to God. A new life. “Born again!”
3. Baptism by the Holy Spirit. “Repent, be baptized, and receive the Gift of the Holy Spirit.”
4. Obedience – at some level obedience. There seems to be a direct correlation between obedience to the commands of God and receiving the Holy Spirit. “*The Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him*” (Acts 5:32).

In many Christian denominations, baptism is said to be a sacrament. A Christian sacrament is defined as an action initiated by Jesus that extends a spiritual gift of grace and evokes the Holy Spirit in one’s life by the very performance of the act.

Here is the interesting thing. Mennonites have traditionally resisted the terminology used by the Catholics, those who they rebelled against, so we don’t call them sacraments, but signs or symbols.

John Roth, a history professor at Goshen College has written a very good trilogy looking at Mennonite history, entitled *Beliefs, Stories & Practices*. I believe we now have them in our library. This is some of what he writes about baptism in his book *Beliefs*:

Baptism is therefore not a “sacrament” in the sense that it carries inherent spiritual power, but rather is a “sign” or a “symbol.” P. 67

Even though Mennonites describe baptism as a symbol, it is never “merely” a “symbol” or “just” water. In a real sense, the public act of water baptism and the incorporation of the believer into the community evokes, or makes tangible, the movement of the Spirit. P.68

So, which is it? Does baptism in water have the potential for evoking the Holy Spirit or does it not? We can’t have it both ways. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism.

How important is the act of baptism in the salvation process? Well to quote a pastor friend of mine, “it is only as important as repentance, believing, and salvation.

Are there exceptions? Yes. What about those who lack the capacity or the intellect to make an adequate decision? What about those who have never been presented with the Gospel message? What about young children who aren’t raised in a Christian home and die at a young age? What about the thief on the cross? He didn’t have the opportunity to come down and be baptized in water? But he did have the opportunity to repent, at least in his heart. And it is the heart which Jesus recognizes. But do the exceptions change the norm?

Why is it that there seems to be so little change taking place in Christians today? Why is it that there seems to be little difference between self-proclaimed “born again” Christians and non-Christians? Has the Holy Spirit lost His power? Has the Holy Spirit lost His ability to change people’s lives? If not, then what is the issue? Is it our openness to the Holy Spirit? Is it our lack of obedience?

Does God expect perfection? I think not! Jesus’ words captured at the end of Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” is probably a bad translation. Luke 6:36 probably captured the intent of Jesus’ words best in his translation, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Does God expect change and growth from His children? Yes! Are we becoming more merciful? Are we becoming more loving? Are we growing more Christlike? Are we growing in the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Have we really turned from our old life, that in which we were controlled by our sinful nature, and have we turned to our new life, where we are controlled by God’s Holy Spirit?

I was recently reading about an Episcopal church in Atlanta, Georgia which celebrates its baptism of its members by creating a banner for each one who is baptized. On the banner is the person’s name, the date of the baptism, and the phrase, “Christ’s Own Forever” on it. On one occasion, on the day when one of the children was baptized, his family held a party for him back at their house. The boy’s mother took the banner and hung it on the front of the house, for everyone to see. “Christ’s own forever!” That same afternoon, some of the family’s friends who had lived nearby and who had been out of town for a short while, drove by the house and saw the banner with the phrase, “Christ’s own forever!” An hour later in the middle of the party; the phone rang. It was the voice of the neighbor who had driven by and seen the banner outside the house. The neighbor said, “I’m so sorry to trouble you, and I feel awful asking you this, but has something happened while we’ve been out of town? (Followed by an awkward silence). Then the voice on the other end of the line asked, “Did your son die?”

Of course, he hadn’t physically, but in a way he had. Being “Christ’s own forever!” means dying to ourselves. The act of baptism symbolizes the dying to ourselves when we go under, and then the rising to new life. For most of Christianity today, we have lost that sense of baptism. Yes, it is about saying yes to Jesus, but it also about us saying no to our old life. It is about starting anew, being “born again,” and growing, not to perfection, but to maturity in Christ.

And it is about receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Actually I have asked a lot of questions this morning. By now you might be wondering about the title of my message this morning, “The Big Question?” What is the big question? We find it in our other New Testament passage for this morning, Acts 19:1-7:

“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” Acts 19:2

There are two baptisms required for salvation. One, “Baptism of repentance” for the forgiveness of sins, symbolizing our acknowledgement of the sin in our lives and the intention of turning

from that sin and turning towards God. And two, “Baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Without the baptism of the Holy Spirit there is no salvation, there is no long lasting change in our behavior.

So the big question for you this morning is have you received the Holy Spirit? Yes, we are told to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance,” meaning that over time that change that takes place within us should be visible to others. But ultimately, it is only you who can answer that question. Have you received the Holy Spirit?

In the mid 1990’s the Allman Brothers Band had a hit song entitled “Back Where It All Begins.” If you’re like me you might not be so enthralled with the music or even the main theme of the song. But it does contain some powerful lyrics:

*When I was younger I was hard to hold
Seems like I was always goin’
Which ever way the wind was blown’
Now that travelin’ spirit calls me again
Callin’ me back to where it all begins*

There is a longing and yearning within all of us to go back to “where it all begins. There is a longing to go back to when life seemed simpler, our faith seemed stronger, our ideals were purer and our strength was fresh. The baptism of Jesus should remind us of our own baptism, i.e. “where it all began,” or it should call us to our own need for repentance, baptism, and a new life, especially as we begin a new year with a fresh starting point and focus, so that some day we can say that this day was the day it all began.

The Old Testament Scripture this morning goes all the way back to the beginning, Genesis, chapter 1:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:1-2 (NIV)

What do our three Scripture passages this morning from Mark, Acts, and Genesis all have in common? The work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God was there at creation, the same Spirit which was present at Jesus’ baptism, and the same Spirit who moves in our life today.

Holy Spirit, Come with Power

*Holy Spirit, come with power, breathe into our aching night.
We expect you this glad hour, waiting for your strength and light.
We are fearful, we are ailing, we are weak and selfish too.
Break upon your congregation, give us vigor, life a new.*

*Holy Spirit, come with fire, burn us with your presence new.
Let us as one mighty choir sing our hymn of praise to you.*

*Burn away our wasted sadness and enflame us with your love.
Burst upon your congregation, give us gladness from above.*

*Holy Spirit, bring your message, burn and breathe each word anew,
deep into our tired living till we strive your work to do.
Teach us love and trusting kindness, lend our hands to those who hurt.
Breathe upon your congregation and inspire us with your word.*