

Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-22

## Receiving the Holy Spirit

I have a book called *Crazy Talk: A Not-So Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms* edited by Rolf Jacobson. He is also a professor at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis and a podcaster who I find rather entertaining. Let me give you a taste of his humor. Rolf defines baptism as “The cosmic dunk-tank (or if you’re scared, the spiritual sprinkler); the Big Bath; a dip in the deep end of the sacral pool; the only rinsing your soul will ever need.”<sup>1</sup>

It is a poke at the many and various ways different churches baptize people. In the Presbyterian tradition we tend to be the spiritual sprinkling type. We don’t immerse people head to toe in a bath of any kind. We also tend to baptize more infants than adults but certainly I will sprinkle anyone of any age who desires to be baptized.

There are a few things that I do ask people to think about whether they are asking for their child to be baptized or themselves. First off, I particularly let parents know that baptism is not about whether or not God loves your child and whether or not your child will make it into heaven if something terrible happened. God’s love is there from the time of conception and throughout our lives. So if baptism isn’t about just getting “it” done, what is it about?

Well, baptism is a whole lot about what God is doing through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not simply a Christian initiation project but rather a visible expression of the Good News...the Gospel. In baptism, water signifies forgiveness and new life. As I try to explain this, it is like so many other things about our faith, it is mystery, and trying to give a mystery words can be complicated.

You see, baptism is a promise of the Holy Spirit at work in one’s life and yet the Holy Spirit is always at work in the world whether or not we are paying attention. And the Holy Spirit isn’t just a New Testament Jesus thing. The Holy Spirit was at work when the world was created. We hear of it as the breath of God bringing life. Which is still the case. And the Spirit is complex,

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, Rolf A., Editor. *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Augsburg Books. Minneapolis. 2008. Page 25 .

just like God. It is not something we can fully understand or comprehend. I have a pamphlet that gives thirty-two different names for the Holy Spirit with the scripture references as to where to find those different ways of naming the Spirit so there is a lot going on with the Spirit.

Just to name a few of ways the Holy Spirit is at work...the Spirit is the life-giving breath of God. The Spirit comforts, counsels, and gives strength, continually teaching us as we grow in Christ. The Holy Spirit is eternal God, God's generous and willing spirit, the Spirit of holiness. It is the Spirit by which we are made God's children. I could go on, but hopefully you have figured out that the Holy Spirit is part of God and at work within us and the world.

And yet the Holy Spirit is often the part of God that we talk the least about. It is like we are afraid that someone will think we have gone off the deep end if we begin to speak of things of the Spirit. God the Father, well people seem as comfortable as they can be with that. Jesus the Son...at least he was human so we can get our minds wrapped around some of that, but the Holy Spirit, well that seems to be akin to trying to nail Jello to a wall.

Yet...yet...here we have two of many scriptures that speak directly about the work of the Holy Spirit. In Luke, John the Baptist addresses the crowds gathering around him. They had so many questions and these were not just head questions, the scripture says they were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John. You see people knew their scriptures then. Their scriptures being what we now call the Old Testament. And they knew there was a promised Messiah. John was busy telling them the truth about their condition as people who were hurting and in need of a relationship with God and so they wondered whether or not he was the guy the nation had been waiting for. He lets them know in no uncertain terms, that he is not even worthy to untie the sandals of the one that they are waiting for. The one that they are waiting for will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Okay, fire as we are witnessing on our new feeds right now as we watch parts of LA burn can be pretty frightening and destructive. We like to think of Jesus as tender, meek and mild. But the person John the baptizer is talking about has a ton of power, the power of fire and it is with fire and the Holy Spirit that we will be baptized.

Holy Crap! Thank goodness we use water. But water also can be dangerous. We can drown in water. It can be a place of murky death, but also a refreshing

reboot. Hence why water makes a wonderful symbol for dying to life that is not life-giving and rising to a life that is.

Luke's story of Jesus baptism is different from the other gospels as well as in it we don't know whether or not John baptized Jesus. All we are told, with little to know detail is that "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

So still a pretty amazing moment to witness. The heavens opening up. The space between heaven and earth so thin that heaven breaks open onto the earth. This is God. Though God is a formidable force, God is not a force that wreaks havoc or toys with us. God is personal and communal, present, with us, for us, and wants relationship with us.

Baptism is one of those ways to signify how important that relationship is to us. Baptism is personal but usually done in the presence of a faith community as we do not grow in faith and understanding all by ourselves. We do this in community and then share it with those who may not yet know that there is a redeeming, loving presence called God who longs to give each person and the world abundant life.

The scripture reading from Acts also speaks to the Apostles Peter and John journeying to Samaria to witness the Holy Spirit in action with people they never would have thought God was willing to work with. "The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:15-17).

They are other biblical stories I could share of baptism and the Holy Spirit at work in that, but all that needs saying at this time is that baptism is a sign of the Holy Spirit at work in people. It happens in different ways but always at some point include God sending the Holy Spirit. This is in part why it can be said that God is always with us. The ever-present Spirit is at work before during and after baptism. The Holy Spirit is at work even without baptism. And though baptism is something God does, it is also our response to the invitation of God to be in relationship. To recognize that God has a place for us, in us, and with us.

Today, if you have been baptized, may it be a day to remember your baptism and consider what it has meant for you and how you will continue to grow in faith because of your baptism. If you would like to be baptized, well...come have a chat with me. And even if you choose not to be baptized, know that you are a beloved child of God and God is still at work in you. Baptism is just one more visible way to remember that we are on a Christian pilgrimage throughout our lives, a pilgrimage of faith and community.

Thanks be to God for the amazing gift of baptism and the Holy Spirit!