

## Sermon on the Baptism of Christ, January 14, 2024

All our readings today reference the Holy Spirit. Did you notice that? In the beginning, a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Wind is Ruah, which also means Spirit or breath. The breath of God, the Spirit of God swept over the face of the deep darkness of chaos, and God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Created through the power of the Spirit. Bringing light into darkness, order into chaos, the beauty of creation from the formless void. God's ever creating Spirit.

In the psalm, the psalmist describes the power of God over nature, kind of like the powerful wind of a hurricane, the way it's described. The most powerful force they'd experienced, perhaps. The closest thing to God they could imagine. Wind. Spirit. And the psalmist prays this God will give strength to his people, and peace.

In the Book of Acts, St. Paul arrives in Ephesus and discovers some believers, but they have never heard of the Spirit. Paul immediately asks, "Well, weren't you baptised? How were you baptised if you never heard of the Spirit?" Even that early, it seems, people were baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. And Paul understood clearly that when a person is baptised, they receive the Spirit of God. So he baptises them in the name of Jesus and they do receive the Spirit.

St. Mark tells us today that St. John the Baptist told the people that the one coming after him would baptise with the Holy Spirit. And when Jesus is baptised, the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven and rests on him.

So in all these readings, we have the theme of the Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, who creates something from nothing, who holds power over the whole earth, who rests on us in our baptisms and forever after. The Holy Spirit who joins us to Christ when we are baptised, so that we become a part of the Body of Christ, part of Jesus' family, part of the church. The Spirit takes us, who were outside, and brings us in, joins us to Christ in baptism. And forever after we belong.

Baptism is a bit like adoption. We are adopted into the family of God. I have no idea where the idea arose that our Christian life and faith is a strictly personal matter, an individual matter. Kind of like, Me and Jesus having a good relationship so I'll go to heaven when I die and it doesn't involve anyone else. No. From the very beginning, Christian life and faith has involved being adopted or born again into the family of God, the Body of Christ, that is, the church. Christian life is and has always been a corporate matter.

When you're adopted into a family, you don't just form a relationship with the parents. You also form a relationship with the siblings and aunts and uncles and cousins. You become part of the family. Parents do relate individually to each child, of course, but they also relate to them collectively, and so does God. And as children of God, born again into the Body of Christ, the Household of God, we also enter into relationships with all our siblings. Whether we happen to like them or not! And there might well be some we don't like!

The Holy Spirit received in baptism, received even more fully at confirmation, works within us to help us grow into the full stature of Christ, of whom we have become part. The Spirit transforms us into Christ, actually. The more we welcome the Spirit to grow in us, the more we will become like Jesus. The more Jesus will dwell within us and guide us, direct us, help us to live according to his teachings.

I often think of the church as a sort of practice ground for the life in Christ. Kind of like when you're taking flying lessons, you work first with a simulator before they turn you loose with an actual airplane. Or when you're learning to ride a bicycle, you start with training wheels. The church is like our simulator, or our training wheels. It should be a supportive community who helps us to grow into the full stature of Christ. We practice following Jesus' commandments here and then we can try them out in the wider world. The church should be a little microcosm of the Kingdom of God, where we are kind and supportive and loving and welcoming to each other, forgiving each other's blunders, helping each other get up and try again when we fall.

The baptismal vows in the BAS tell us what the Christian life should look like. They sum up Jesus' teachings and when we're baptised, we promise to follow Jesus and live by his teachings, with God's help. Because we want to be joined to Christ and that's how we can live out that new life. We'll get a chance to renew those vows later on. We're going to look at a couple now. The first one is "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers?" This means, will you actually be part of the church? Will you show up? Will you gather with the Body of Christ to read the Scriptures, hear the teaching, pray together, share bread and wine together?

I've heard people say, "I can be just as good a Christian on the golf course as I can in church." And you know, it's not true. You can be just as good a person. But not just as good a Christian. Because gathering together for Scripture, teaching, prayers, communion and fellowship is at the heart of what it means to be adopted into the family. Trying to go it on your own is like being adopted into a family and then moving out the next day and never seeing them again.

I realised this in a new way during Covid, when we couldn't gather. We managed to gather online, which is better than nothing, but it wasn't the same. I missed you all like a physical ache. Christians need to gather. We need to gather to worship together, to learn together, to share bread and wine, the communion of Christ's body and blood, food for our journey. We also need to gather so we can practice living the Christian life in a fairly supportive environment.

Another example. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbour as ourselves, and respect the dignity of every human being. Well, this is an area where the church is a great practice ground. We can practice caring for each other's dignity. We can practice loving our neighbours as ourselves. And boy, does it take some practice sometimes! Because, frankly, it isn't easy. Especially with some people! It boils down to treating each other the way we would like to be treated. And that's a good way to start.

Wherever you find yourself, look around, see what's going on, and ask yourself, "How would I like to be treated in this situation? If I was that person?" and then do it.

So, what might that look like in practice? Let's say someone new comes to church, we welcome them. Actually, I hear from all sorts of people that this church is very welcoming. That's good. We have someone at the door greeting people as they come in. We have someone in the church greeting them. Several of you make a point of noticing strangers and going and saying hello and welcome. This is great. But then there comes truly making them belong, integrating them. Making them one of us on an equal basis. To begin, eg, at coffee hour or church social events, if we see someone standing alone, we can go and talk to them. But we also want to visit with our friends. So, after we've said hello to newcomers, it's easy to leave them and go sit with our friends. Instead, how about inviting the newcomer to join us with our friends? Because we wouldn't want to be left isolated. I've been to coffee hours where no one spoke to me and it feels awful and really awkward.

Welcoming people means treating them as we would like to be treated. When I first joined the church, St. Stephen's just outside Victoria, I went with my grandmother. She had just started going to church herself, after a very lengthy time away. She had the most amazing garden. And she volunteered to help with the church flowers. They had a roster where you did it for one month a year and they gave her January, the one month in the year when she had pretty well no flowers in her garden, because no one else wanted it and they didn't want to give up the good months in the summer. She felt a bit slighted and it stayed that way for years. Wouldn't it have been better if they'd rearranged the schedule so they all got a turn at the good months and the bad ones?

We can practice saying, "If I was that person, how would I like to be treated?" And then act accordingly. If I volunteered to help, would I like people to let me help? Yes! Then let others help. If I brought a dish to a potluck, would I like people to at least try it, even if they'd never seen it before? Yes! Then try that new dish, even if you don't know what it is. You might even like it. If I have a suggestion, would I like people to listen respectfully and actually think about it? Yes! Then listen and think about it. If I'd like to be given the benefit of the doubt, then give the other person the same. It's not really hard. It's just getting in the habit of checking our behaviour: Am I treating that person as I would like to be treated?

Besides God, the church is our greatest resource in living the Christian life. And the Spirit is ever renewing the church, transforming it, growing it, just as the Spirit renews us. The church can help keep us accountable for living the way Jesus taught us to, which mostly boils down to loving each other. The church should be here to encourage us, to challenge us, to comfort us, to cheer us on. If we welcome this it will be a huge help in following Jesus.

When we are baptised, God's Holy Spirit goes to work to restore us, heal us, transform us, nurture us until we are like Jesus. Until keeping our baptismal covenant is second nature to us because we've practiced it so much. Until loving our neighbours comes naturally and easily. Mostly. Until forgiving each other seems the obvious thing to do and we just do it, because we remember we are all fallible. And this is all a lifelong project. And God's Spirit works this miracle of transformation not just in us individually but in us as a

body, a church, helping the community of the church grow until we are a reflection of the Kingdom of God.

As we reflect on Jesus' baptism and our own today, as we renew our own baptismal vows, may we be strengthened by God's Spirit, God's mighty, creative Spirit, to become more fully the loving, forgiving, kind, considerate, welcoming people we are meant to be. May we grow each day more and more into the full stature of Christ, by the grace of God.