

Sermon: Waiting on the Spirit

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17**

The Book of Acts is sometimes called the Fifth Gospel. It was written by Luke and the two books put together form a unit. Some call the first unit the Book of the Acts of Jesus and the other the Book of the Acts of the Spirit, though generally it is called the Book of the Acts of the Apostles for how they spread the word about Jesus. But, as we can see in today's readings, it is the Spirit who animates everything having to do with the early church.

The lectionary pairs these two readings because they both have to do with baptism and the Holy Spirit, and each raises some questions, some of which have answers.

Reconciliation is a major theme in Luke's writing, and we get a glimpse of it in today's passage from Acts. Historically, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was strained, to say the least, and in Jesus' time, the troubles were already 800 years old. They began when Assyria conquered Samaria and then resettled people from Babylon and other places into Samaria. Those displaced peoples brought their own customs and religions with them. Over time, there was a melting-pot effect and the Samaritans eventually became their own religious sect with their own version of Scripture, all of which alienated them from their Jewish relatives. There came also a political separation. Between religion and politics, hostilities arose and only got worse across the centuries.

By the first century, Samaritans were considered renegades at best. At worst, they were enemies and not to be trusted. That was what gave Luke's story about the so-called Good Samaritan its power; to anyone but a Samaritan, there were no good ones. And Jesus sitting at a well with a Samaritan *woman* and *speaking* to her: that was scandalous.

This kind of thing can shake your faith. Imagine what Luke's readers might have thought when they first heard these stories. The Gospels are often confusing and challenging, not to mention disturbing, but remember: they *are* Good News.

Here's a question people have asked for 2,000 years: Did Jesus need baptism? He's the Son of God, right? You would think that that would be enough, but no.

Luke gives us a long birth narrative and a story from Jesus' youth before we get to today's passage. Immediately after this, Luke presents Jesus' genealogy. It is given in reverse order from Matthew's, some of the names are different, there are no women in Luke's version, and it goes all the way to 'Seth, son of Adam, son of God.' Matthew's version starts with Abraham and ends with Joseph 'the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.'

In the middle, we have this bit about baptism and it marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. What we know from Luke is that Jesus was with *all* the people, and that Jesus was probably last in line. The birth narrative shows that Jesus was born into a world of sin and his baptism shows that he stands with the sinners, so, yes, Jesus needed baptism.

A man named Clarence Jordan, who was a farmer, a Greek New Testament scholar, and a founder of Habitat for Humanity, paraphrased and transposed the Gospels to the rural, early twentieth-century Deep South, specifically Georgia. His audience was made up primarily of black tenant farmers who were, as you can guess, subject to persecution and an unjust system as were Jesus' followers.

Jordan called his translation *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, and in it, the president stood in for Caesar; the governor of Georgia took Herod's place; Bethlehem became Gainesville; and the crucifixion became a lynching.

Jordan's editor, Dallas Lee, called him 'a disturber of the peace,' especially if that peace was the divisive, racist, economically unjust peace of the rural South.

Now imagine that you are among his audience and you hear these modern words from Luke's Gospel: 'So it happened that while the people were getting baptized, Jesus too was baptized. And as he prayed, the sky was split and the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove came down on him. And from the sky came a voice, saying, "You are my dear Son; I'm proud of you."'"

Who wouldn't want to hear that kind of affirmation, especially if it came from God? It's an immediate lift, hearing words like that. Some people go their whole lives without hearing a word of praise or encouragement. But these words sent Jesus out to begin his ministry.

John the Baptist spoke about Jesus carrying his winnowing fork in his hand. John took an agricultural practice and made it into a metaphor about something else. The wheat and the chaff are all one thing until it hits the threshing floor for Jesus' winnowing fork to separate. The chaff is just the leftover stuff, an external husk that has no value to God; it is gathered and burned because there's no reason to keep it. The wheat, on the other hand, is saved and gathered into the granary.

We often think of the wheat and the chaff as an Us vs. Them situation, and it's 50-50 which side we land on. If you're struggling in your life and you're feeling down, if things are going bad, if you think of yourself as nothing but a no-good sinner, then you *must* be chaff, destined for the unquenchable fire. And you would be wrong. That's not what Scripture says and it's not how God works. Even in our darkest moments, God values us in the same way a farmer values husked wheat.

Regarding baptism, each of the four Gospels understand Jesus' in a different way. Luke puts an emphasis on prayer: Jesus was praying when heaven opened. This shows us that, just as Jesus comes to us in our sin, in all our imperfections, he also comes to God in prayer. The Holy Spirit becomes a source of strength and encouragement for Jesus.

So, personally, what is our experience of prayer? How do we know the Spirit has come to us? If the Holy Spirit is always on the loose in the world, working in and through Jesus and his baptized followers, how do we work that into our daily lives? Sometimes, it seems we're all too busy to keep it together long enough to ask God for help or to offer thanks. Some of us we have all we can do just to stop and be still.

There is an internet company out there called despair.com which makes and sells *demotivational* posters. One of my favorites shows a sinking ship and the caption reads, 'It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others.'

God doesn't see it that way. Each of us is called by God to fulfill some purpose.

According to Luke, the progression is baptism – prayer – ministry. We all fit somewhere along that line. Baptism sets us on that path. The Holy Spirit gives us strength for the journey.

In our baptism, as God's beloved children, we take on a new identity, a secure identity. God said, 'you are my child; I am proud of you.' Those are words we need to hear. Just as they gave Jesus a lift at the beginning of his ministry, so too will they lift us.

And, motivated by the Holy Spirit working in us and through us, when *we* speak those words, we can give a lift to our neighbors, our friends, and our families.

Amen.