

The Lord, the giver of life

Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by the Rev. Tom Pumphrey, January 7, 2018

The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, Year B, Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

*Genesis 1:1-5 (NRSV): In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then 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.*

*Acts 19:1-7(NRSV): While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." 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, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them.*

*Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV): John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 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 just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." said to his disciples*

For over twelve years, I worked for the Lincoln Electric Company. Lincoln manufactures and sells welding equipment and supplies. In sales, and in my Product Management jobs, I was sometimes called to help address an equipment failure. Very rarely, a customer would get a new machine right out of the box, they would connect their equipment together, press the "on" button, and nothing would happen. No life in the machine whatsoever. When I was new to the job, I would drive out to visit the customer and check over the machine thoroughly, and often find that the machine was in perfect order. So very quickly, I learned to ask one question before I drove out. Can you guess what that question was? "Is it plugged in?"

A welding machine can be perfectly built and prepared for its heavy-duty job, but unless it is plugged into its power source, it has no life whatsoever. Without its source of power, it is what we in the business called a "300 pound paper-weight." You don't have to be a welder to understand how this works. A perfectly good car will not run if the fuel tank is empty. A perfectly good cell phone is no more than a fancy rock without a charged battery. Without a source of power, nothing has life.

So what do you suppose is our power source? Where does our life come from? We can answer this on two levels—one as a theological question about all humanity—how are we alive to begin with? We hear in our reading from Genesis hints of how God created. We heard that God created

“while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Remember, however, that in Hebrew and in Greek—the languages of the Bible, the word for “wind” is the same as the word for “breath” and the same as the word for “spirit.” A more accurate translation would read “and the spirit of God brooded over the waters.”<sup>1</sup> Remember that God breathed life into the person he created. The Holy Spirit breathed life into the dry bones that Ezekiel saw—even with flesh, those dry bones were as lifeless as a cell phone with a dead battery—they were still lifeless without the life-giving breath of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is the creative force of God—the dynamic power of God at work in the world. The power source of all life is God the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, is the Lord, the giver of Life.

But we might ask the question on another level as well. Where is the source of our spiritual power, the source of our eternal life that Jesus gives to us? What empowers us to endure hardships and struggles and even death to survive in God’s strength? What empowers us to the mission and ministry God gives us?

We heard this morning how Jesus was Baptized and was empowered by the Holy Spirit before he went into the wilderness and began his ministry. What about us? We are not Jesus, of course, but we see in Jesus’ example a pattern for our lives. Remember what John the Baptist says: ‘I baptize you with water, but Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ So what does it mean to be Baptized with the Holy Spirit?

Here, we turn to the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Here, the Apostle Paul meets disciples of Jesus who have been Baptized, but they have never heard of the Holy Spirit. Their baptism was a baptism of repentance—John’s Baptism. So Paul instructs them about the Holy Spirit, and he Baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and he lays his hands on them and prays for them. And they receive the Holy Spirit with great signs.

I remember speaking with a priest friend about this passage, and he said that these disciples must be Episcopalians since they don’t know about the Holy Spirit! He was joking a little, since he is a very charismatic Episcopalian. However, the Holy Spirit often receives little attention in many Christian churches. Pentecostal churches are all about the Holy Spirit and the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. There are some Pentecostal Christians who say that there are two separate Baptisms—a Baptism of water, and a baptism of the Holy Spirit. They turn to this passage in Acts as a prime example. There is another case in Acts where Apostles find those who have the Holy Spirit, but were not Baptized with water, so the apostles baptized them.

My answer to these examples, however, is notice how the Apostles respond to these cases where either water or the Spirit is lacking—they immediately take action to bring the two together. These are excellent examples of how the intention of the church is that the Sacrament of Baptism includes both the repentance of sins and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Notice that the disciples that Paul finds in Ephesus were Baptized in *John’s* name. But John says it is Jesus who will Baptize with the Holy Spirit, So Paul Baptized them in *Jesus’* name, and prays for them to receive the Holy Spirit. When we Baptize Parker and Myers today, we will Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I will lay hands on them and mark them

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<sup>1</sup> See KJV, NIV and ESV translations.

with oil, saying “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever! We are Baptized in the Holy Spirit—the Giver of Life.

The Holy Spirit is the giver of life, the creative and creating power of God in the world and in our lives. In our broken human lives, the gift of the Holy Spirit given through Jesus Christ is our gift of life. The Holy Spirit is our power source for new life in Christ.

Of course, there are days and sometimes weeks and years where we feel drained of life. Sometimes we become on a first name basis with Hospital staff or Nursing Home staff. Some days look a lot like the wilderness into which the Spirit drove Jesus. And some people are well acquainted with the wilderness of hard times and personal tragedy and loss. Those are times where even though our vital statistics say that we are in working order, we simply don’t feel like we have the strength or energy to move forward. We feel like that unplugged welding machine—like a 300 pound paper weight.

So, as a different sort of trouble-shooter, I can still ask people the question: “are you plugged-in?” In those dark wilderness journeys, are you plugged in to the strength of your Baptism? We join together as a community in reaffirming our Baptismal Covenant—we practice remembering our Baptism so that we don’t forget God in those wilderness journeys. Remember the covenant that God makes with us in Baptism: “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” Remember your power source—your source of life and strength, your source of new and eternal life.

The Holy Spirit gives us new life in Christ, where our sins, our failures, even death itself has no power over us. The Holy Spirit gives us new life that overcomes our tragedies and crises, new life that can rise from the ashes of dead relationships and failures.

The Holy Spirit also drives us into the world to glorify God by our ministries. Sometimes we are driven into the wilderness, just as Jesus was. But the Holy Spirit is with us—God is with us in the places of great abundance, and in the wilderness. The creative and creating power of God dwells with us to carry us through whatever we face today and whatever tomorrow will bring.

The Holy Spirit is God with us, God the Lord, the giver of life. Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus sends us into the world empowered by the Holy Spirit for new life in him. Jesus sends us into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

So, are you plugged in?