

First Sunday after The Epiphany - Year C
January 10, 2010
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

“In The Name Of The Holy Spirit, The Lord, The Giver Of Life”

Text: Isaiah 43:7, Psalm 29, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

On December 16th, 2006 I was ordained to the priesthood. The ordination service itself was no different from any other in the Episcopal Church, But what happened to me was different than I ever experienced before even though I had been ordained before, just six months earlier.

As we processed in and the singing of that great old hymn, St. Patrick's Breastplate began, my eyes started to fill with tears. I was not sad, rather I was joyful, But the tears came from a deeper place than the joy. After I took my place in the front pew next to Jackie, I reached out to hold her hand, as the service progressed, I held her hand tighter and tighter, and the tears flowed freely. I felt like I would fall over if I did not hold her hand, so I held on tight. The service went smoothly and was beautiful, but that was not a concern of mine. I felt like I was in another world, like I was being cleansed from within from things I was not aware needed cleaning, and being renewed in my spirit. I felt wrapped up in joy and peace, as if I was getting a tiny taste of heaven, like my heart was overflowing with Love.

My tears continued to flow throughout the service, through my helping distribute the Eucharist, and up to the end of the last hymn. I was crying, but I was not embarrassed. When people lined up to greet me, and asked for my blessing as is customary after a priest has been ordained, I felt a new power within me, a new gift that had been given for my ministry, and in some way I sensed God's blessing flowing through me to these people.

What did I experience that day? I think it was beyond just ordination. I believe what I experienced was the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has gotten the short end of the stick, in the Episcopal Church for a long time, but even in the whole western Catholic church, the Holy Spirit seemed to get left to the side, sort of disregarded in the midst of the Trinity, for the first two thousand years of Christian history.

It seems that it even started out that way, for as we see in Acts this morning, people were getting baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, without even being aware of the Holy Spirit.

Things are changing in this area, and the Holy Spirit has come onto the world stage in a big way, in just this past hundred years.

I read this book once, which I commend to you, called *Fire From Heaven*, in which the author described the rise of experience of the Holy Spirit, from the Azuza Street revival in 1905, through the twentieth century. He thought this was the ushering in of a new age of the Church, in which the Holy Spirit, would get the attention that the father and the Son had received in the first two thousand years.

If that is the case, and I believe it is likely to be so, we in the Episcopal Church had better jump on the Spirit train, before it leaves the station without us. That has been on my mind as I prepared to talk to you this morning, because I feel the Spirit moving in these readings, and I believe we need to talk some about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, which figures so prominently in our readings today.

I want to discuss three questions: What is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit? When does it happen? What does it accomplish in us?

What is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit? Well it's something that makes what Jesus offers us unique from the baptism of John for repentance. John told those who came to him for baptism, "bear fruit worthy of repentance." It was in their power, to show signs that they turned back to God, and they could bear this fruit as a result of the baptism with water, that John gave them.

John said of Jesus, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and fire." The Holy Spirit offers us more than just repentance and turning away from sin. And it may or may not happen at our baptism in water.

So when does the baptism of the Holy Spirit happen? Well, we see in the lesson from Acts, that the Samaritans had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. "Peter and John laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

This is where we get the notion, that Confirmation is a sacramental act, that through the laying on of hands, and prayer by the Bishop, who is in a direct line of succession going back to the Apostles Peter, John, and the others... We call that Apostolic Succession. We believe that the Holy Spirit can and often does come through that action, and empowers adult Christians for life in the Holy Spirit within the Church. But the Holy Spirit has shown us, through history, especially recent history, that He will not be constrained to act only within those sacraments of the church, but is coming upon many people, as the

prophet said, "In those days I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." Many have received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, outside of the sacrament of Confirmation, but many people receive Him at that time as well.

That, I imagine, is why my father had a little talk with me before my Confirmation, back in 1990, about what I might experience, when the bishop laid his hands on my head. I did not, at that time, and I don't know why. But from Jesus' baptism in the Gospel we read today, we see that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, at least happens after one is baptized, and while one is praying. The Gospel says: "when Jesus had also been baptized, and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." Of course, that was a unique baptism, and I have never heard of the baptism of the Holy Spirit happening like that for anyone else, but then that was Jesus.

However, it helps to note, that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, is indeed experienced by different people, in different ways. I experienced primarily tears, some start to speak in other languages, receiving the gift of tongues, as we see in the Acts of the Apostles, some fall down and lie on the ground in bliss, enjoying a sort of rest in the Spirit, some laugh, some leap for joy. It seems as many ways of expressing human emotions, are open to the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

And perhaps that's why we have been reluctant to accept it in the Episcopal Church, because it sometimes goes outside, our norms for what is proper and reserved. And when we were too reserved to accept Him, the Holy Spirit leaped joyfully into other churches, disregarding the Apostolic Succession, and baptizing Christians in himself, upon the prayer and laying on of hands, in many other churches, by lay people, and clergy alike. And yet, because of His greatness, and his mercy, He also remains in our Church, happy to pour Himself, into whoever is willing.

And mark that the Holy Spirit is respectful, and His nature is Love, so He will not do something to you, that you cannot stand or accept. You have to want it, and be open to it, for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit to happen. But I digress, a little from what I was saying, The baptism of the Holy Spirit, happens sometime after our Christian baptism, and through prayer and often the laying on of hands, which is why we mark it most regularly with Confirmation, but as I experienced, it may happen after that even, whenever we are ready to accept it.

What does the baptism of the Holy Spirit accomplish in us? Well it is always described as a wonderful experience, and it draws the believer into a deeper relationship with God, but it is much more than just an experience, and really needs to be seen for what is conferred

upon us, so that we don't abuse it in our lust for new experiences. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit serves to empower us for God's ministry beyond what we could possibly do on our own.

After Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit, he began his earthly ministry in earnest. The Apostles started the church, after they received their baptism in the Holy Spirit, and that Church grew through the actions of all the believers after they had received the Holy Spirit. That is why the apostles in Jerusalem, sent Peter and John to the Samaritans, after they heard that Samaria had accepted the Word, but had not yet received the Holy Spirit.

For me, the baptism of the Holy Spirit empowered me for a new ministry as a priest in his church, but it is certainly not reserved for clergy alone. That is a misconception, which I believe is not as present here as it perhaps used to be, as so many are active in ministry, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Many here today have already received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but I am guessing that the baby we are about to baptize, is not the only one who has not.

If you believe you need this, I encourage you to come on our Alpha Course, which starts this week. The Holy Spirit figures prominently in the Course, and is the focus of the Weekend Away. We sometimes call that weekend, the Holy Spirit weekend, because we spend the whole weekend learning more about the Spirit, and praying for the filling of the Holy Spirit, in each of us. Many find the Holy Spirit weekend, to be the high point of the Alpha Course, and many find that their life as Christians seems renewed by their experience of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Alpha Course.

You could of course, also wait for the next Confirmation, and pray for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit at that time, if you have not already been Confirmed.

Or perhaps you don't know if you're ready, or this scares you a little, as you wonder how God would manifest, his Spirit in you. But I can say, as God says often in scripture, don't be afraid. Pray to be ready for his Spirit. The Spirit is coming upon Ascension, preparing us for a stronger, bigger ministry, than we have had in the past. Will you be a part of it? will you accept the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?

Pray with me: O God, you prepared your disciples for the coming of the Spirit through the teaching of your Son Jesus Christ: Make the hearts and minds of your servants here ready to receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit, that they may be filled with the strength of his presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*