

God empowers us with his Holy Spirit
A sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, January 13, 2019
The First Sunday after Epiphany (the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord), Year C
Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Acts 8:14-17 (NRSV): When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 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.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (NRSV): As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

...Now 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."

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. We remember Jesus' Baptism in fulfillment of John's promise. Jesus is the one greater than John, the one who will Baptize us with the Holy Spirit. At Jesus' Baptism, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and God blesses his Son from heaven. Then, when the Holy Spirit has acted in this way, Jesus is sent forward into ministry.

Especially with the New Testament reading today about the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit, I think that this feast is the intersection between Christmas and Pentecost. Christmas is the feast that celebrates God coming to be with us in Jesus. Pentecost is the feast that celebrates God coming to be with us in his Holy Spirit. Today's readings connect the two together in Jesus' baptism. Through Jesus, God empowers us with his Holy Spirit. In Baptism, Jesus is revealed and the Holy Spirit is active. At Jesus' Baptism the Holy Spirit is active, sending Jesus into ministry. The same is true for us. God empowers us with his Holy Spirit.

Long after Jesus' Baptism, after his death and resurrection and ascension, The Apostles are filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit empowers them for ministry, and they go out into the world. Philip goes to Samaria and shares the Good News of Jesus. The Samaritans are Baptized, but they don't know about the Holy Spirit. They are like a sports car with an empty gas tank, or a cell phone with a dead battery. They were blessed with a fantastic gift, but they weren't empowered to experience the value of that gift. So the church takes action to remedy the situation. The Apostles Peter and John go from Jerusalem to Samaria and pray for them, laying hands on them and the Samaritans also receive the Holy Spirit.

This is sort of like when the Bishop comes to visit us and lays his hands on candidates for Confirmation to pray for them. The difference is that the Bishop prays for a *strengthening* of the Holy Spirit. You see, what the church intends in the sacrament of Baptism is what Peter and John intended for the Samaritans: that Baptism is both being saved from our sins and being filled with the Holy Spirit. In baptism, God empowers us with his Holy Spirit.

Today we Baptize Luke Henry Galbraith. He will be cleansed from sin and sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, given new life in Jesus Christ. Now we might look at Luke and say that he is just a baby. We might not see the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. And yet the Holy Spirit will be at work in him. Indeed, the Holy Spirit will be at work through the adults in his life as well, as they fulfill their promises to teach Luke the faith, to show him how to pray, to help him read the Bible and walk with God each day. They will bring him to church to continue in the Apostles fellowship and teaching, the breaking of bread and in the prayers. They will proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. They will serve Christ in the world in justice, peace and respect.

Now if the rest of you think that you are just witnesses to this Baptism, remember that you all will make promises for Luke as well. All of us will promise to uphold Luke in his Baptism, and support him in his life in Christ. All of us will renew our own Baptismal covenant, to confess Jesus as Lord, to declare our belief and reaffirm the kind of life we will live. God empowers us with his Holy Spirit in our Baptism, so we are empowered for ministry, empowered to make a difference in Luke's life and in this community and in the world around us.

Baptism is not a static event, or a ticket-punch on an eternal roster. Baptism is a starting point, a celebration of God's power in our lives: God's power to save us, and God's power to empower us. In Baptism, God launches us on a life with him. God empowers us to share his blessing with the world. God empowers us to build up the body of Christ. God empowers us to grow new Disciples, like Luke. God empowers us to grow as disciples.

Without that empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we are like that sports car with an empty tank, or that cell phone with a dead battery. Our efforts in life stumble and struggle. But empowered by the Holy Spirit, we have the power of God with us.

I spent this weekend with the vestry on retreat—these are the lay leaders of this church. We spent time reviewing the year past and considering the year ahead. We looked for how God has been at work in this community this past year, and we looked for how God might be at work ahead of us, preparing us for ministry this coming year.

It is amazing to see how God has empowered us for ministry this past year. God brought healing to people through our pastoral care, God impacted people's lives in our Youth and Children's Ministries. God drew-in people through our Evangelism and Worship. God brought people hope and help through our service ministries, such as Family Promise. We can also see ways in which the Holy Spirit is already at work preparing us and empowering us for ministry in the future.

For example, this past year we felt called to start a small group ministry called Discipleship Groups. Often when starting a new ministry in the church, getting people involved is a significant challenge. Everyone is busy, everyone has commitments. In this case, however, things were different. As we talked about idea of Discipleship Groups, we found more and more people excited to plan and prepare for this ministry. Many people were looking for just this kind of opportunity, and others felt that same desire that resonated with this ministry. Busy and over-committed people became excited and committed to getting involved in something new. We

discovered that God was already at work way ahead of us, and that we only needed to follow him for this ministry to thrive.

On our own, we might try to develop a church program, but on our own, it would fail. But empowered by the Holy Spirit, we find energy and excitement and an impact already happening even in the early stages of this initiative. God the Holy Spirit is at work in this church. As we seek God's empowerment, we receive guidance and wisdom. We learn how to pray and hear God's voice in Holy Scripture. God forms and shapes and prepares us. Just as Jesus was sent and just as Philip and Peter and John were sent out, empowered by the Holy Spirit, so God sends us to bless the world, empowered by his Holy Spirit

So if you remember Christmas and the gift of God with us in Jesus, and if you remember last week at Epiphany, when we were called to bring God's light to the world, see today how in Baptism, God empowers us with his Holy Spirit—to bless us and to bless the world through us. Seek out God's empowerment and share in that blessing that God has in store for us and for others. Support Luke and his family in their life in Christ, support each other, and look for what God is doing in the world.