

Genesis 1:1-5

1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,

1:2 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.

1:3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

1:4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

1:5 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

19:1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

19:2 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."

19:3 Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."

19:4 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."

19:5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

19:6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied--

19:7 altogether there were about twelve of them.

Proclamation of the Word

One of my favorite gifts I received this Christmas was from my husband, Chuck. It was "Wash away your sins Hand Soap." It matches my "wash away your sins" bubble bath. So today as we remember the Baptism of Jesus across the church, I remember my baptism each time I wash my hands. You can too!

This Tuesday our staff gathered together, but we had not all been present around the table for some weeks with family vacation times scheduled. So I asked them to share with our group a "Joy of the season." Kelly shared spending time with her sister and grandfather singing hymns together. Kelly's grandfather joked, "Girls, don't quit your day jobs." Even with the issues of age and memory loss, he has his sense of humor. That was a joy. It was also a gift.

As each person shared their joys, I realized that no one spoke of a specific, tangible gift, something that was waiting under the tree to be unwrapped. Our most beloved joys were the gifts of a house filled

with family and friends, time for rest and recreation, serving Christmas dinner to homeless families in a church gym, and even the peace that comes when the whole town is occupied with celebrations. The email inbox was not as full, as business and work ceased, even if only for a while. One person even spoke of the sorrows of the season, but with thanksgiving for the safety and well-being of her loved ones even in the midst of grief.

God's greatest gifts do come without boxes, bows, and wrapping. It may be a gift card, but a gift card given with lots of joy and kindness that is the real gift.

On Tuesday, January 6, the Christian church celebrated Epiphany, the first day after the 12th day of Christmas. Epiphany means "manifestation". The three magi follow the star from the east and arrive to greet the baby Jesus bringing their most precious gifts to celebrate his birth. We celebrate that God is made manifest in the love of Christ given to the world. We celebrate at Epiphany that God's love in Jesus is for even those outside the covenant, the non-Jew, like the magi who were foreign seeker. And our ideas and limits of God's love are shattered and expanded.

Nativity Story- Ken Robinson tells of time his son was in the Nativity playing the role of Joseph. This really happened. It was time for the magi to come bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Three, four-year old boys with tea towels on their heads put their boxes down.

Boy #1 comes in and says, "I bring you gold."

Boy #2 comes in and says, "I bring you myrrh"

And the third boy comes in and says, "Frank sent this."

Kids will take a chance. They are not afraid to give it a shot.

Robinson states, "They are not frightened of being wrong. ...They are prepared to be wrong. If you are not prepared to be wrong, you never come up with anything original. By the time they become adults, they have lost this capacity. We run our companies like this. We stigmatize making mistakes. And we are now running our national education system where mistakes are the worst thing you can make." They lose their courage and capacity for risk.ⁱ

At Epiphany we celebrate the risk that God took on us and the whole world, not by sending an email or a messenger, but by coming in person, gifting us with his Beloved Son, Jesus. This season of Epiphany is about gifts: gifts given, those who give gifts and in today's passage from Acts, the unique gift from God of the Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱ

The gospels do not give us much detail about Jesus growing up until he is baptized by God's Spirit and begins his earthly witness and ministry. Rather than focus on Jesus' baptism, I want us to linger a bit with the Acts passage because it is instructive for those who follow Jesus. Yes, Baptism administered by John was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. It is a visible sign of an invisible grace that marks us for entrance into the Christian community. It is only the beginning

though. For at each baptism we pray for the working of the Holy Spirit to bring the infant and even the adult to sanctification. A life lived in service to God marked by the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit. So a mark of Christian baptism in the church is that we baptize in the name of the father, son, and Holy Spirit.

Today let's consider the gift of the Holy Spirit given to believers, to us.

Did you hear the confusion from the Ephesian disciples when asked by Paul if they received the Holy Spirit when they became believers? They have never even heard of this Holy Spirit. Reminds me of some Presbyterians I know. So Paul lays hands on them and prays for them to be filled with the Spirit. And they receive the gift. They could not manufacture the Spirit or make God do anything. The Spirit is a gift that we receive. And the Spirit doesn't just arrive at Pentecost.

The Spirit was present hovering over the waters of chaos at creation as we read in Genesis is the same Spirit that overshadows Mary to conceive of Jesus. The Spirit makes the impossible possible. As Mary sings, "Nothing will be impossible for God." (Luke 1:37)

The gift of the Holy Spirit anoints Jesus at the start of his mission when he reads "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor..." (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would be with them when they were hauled before rulers and authorities and required to give an account for their faith. (Luke 12:11)

He promises to be with them always even to the end of the age through the power of the Spirit (John 14)

And at the first Pentecost the Spirit shows up and fires up the gathered believers causing old men to see visions and their sons and daughters to dream dreams. (Acts 2:2)

These Ephesians had heard of Jesus from Apollos and a couple, Priscilla and Aquilla. These four named lay leaders were followers who witnessed to these new disciples as you all do as you lead youth group, Sunday School, SALT groups and Bible Studies. And as the presence of the children remind us, it might take a village to raise a child, but it takes a church to raise a Christian. Just as important are the ways we all witness to what God is doing in our daily lives. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to be His church. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is important that as we begin a new year, and another leg of our Christian journey, that we are all "in process." Baptism is the beginning, hopefully, a new beginning where we come by faith to repent, ask forgiveness, and be welcomed into the community of faith where we might grow and flourish. But Baptism is only the beginning.

Brett Younger writesⁱⁱⁱ:

Baptisms, like all beginnings, find their meaning after the event. Starting, by itself, is of little consequence. Beginning is easy. Finishing is hard. Bobby Knight, the former basketball coach at Texas Tech University— who isn't quoted in many sermons—was asked about a player who was doing a great job coming off the bench, "When will he get to start?"

The coach responded, "You don't understand the game. It doesn't matter who starts. It matters who finishes."

A month before the wedding, glassy-eyed couples try to convince the minister that they are the perfect couple. One of the joys of ministry is getting to tell them. "You get no points for getting this far. On your wedding day, almost every couple is capable of creating a life together filled with faith and joy, and almost every couple is capable of creating something worse than your worst nightmare."

Marriage is a commitment, a responsibility, and a great joy. Younger continues,

Marriages can't be judged on the wedding day. After ten years, you start to see what they've done with it. What does it mean to get married? Sometimes the meaning may be found in pictures of strangely attired bridesmaids and ill-at-ease groomsmen. More often it's discovered each evening as you sit around the dinner table.

Parents bring children to be baptized claiming the promises of God for their child on faith. But the fruits of those promises will show up later as parents guide their children, teach them the stories of Jesus, and bring them to be a part of the church family. Parents and members must demonstrate a life of faithful discipleship and be models for children. And allow the Holy Spirit to work in their lives. Baptism is a commitment, a responsibility, and a great joy. He concludes, "The significance of any decision takes a while to be fully understood. The first draft doesn't look like the final copy. The moments of initiation take on meaning when we're true to the promise of that beginning."

Spirit-led disciples gather as the church, but the fruits of the Spirit are evident in the living out of that Gift. It has been written that the church of God doesn't have a mission; the mission of God has a church. So it is through us, through the Apollos, the Priscillas, Aquillas, and Pauls that the church speaks and prophesies. The Mission of the church is to proclaim in word and sacrament the gospel of Jesus Christ, to welcome the gift of the Kingdom of God, and to live out that message in love, action, and commitment in service to others. And the gift of the Holy Spirit makes all things possible.

Have you ever noticed that God always seems to pick the most unlikely characters to help make manifest his gifts, the magi, the spiritual, but not religious foreigners? God works through the leper, the widow, the eunuch. So pay attention to those who might shine light and make manifest the ways of God: the youth, the immigrant, the doubter, the homeless person, the woman who has lost her ability to remember, but still sees with such clarity at moments. The Holy Spirit works in the most surprising ways, even extending to the magi who seek God. Sometimes children, like in the story of the three little magi bringing their gifts including "Frank sent this." are more sensitive and open to the Spirit.

Robert Coles interviewed black children during the early 1960s when the schools in the South were being integrated. He was astounded by their courage in the face of daily threats from angry mobs. One eight-year-old girl from North Carolina told of a time when she was "all alone, and those [segregationist] people were screaming, and suddenly I saw God smiling, and I smiled. . . . A woman was standing there [near the school door], and she shouted at me, 'Hey, you little n*****, what you smiling at?' I looked right at her face, and I said, 'at God.' Then she looked up at the sky, and then she looked at me, and she didn't call me any more names" (*The Spiritual Life of Children* [Houghton Mifflin, 1990], pp. 19-20). Now that is a child through which the Holy Spirit moved. Sounds a lot like that Jesus' baptism moment with God smiling in the heavens and saying, "This is my Beloved with whom I am well-pleased." May you hear those words, beloved.

So have you opened all of your gifts?

Have you opened your life to the gift and work of the Holy Spirit?

Today and each day is a new beginning. Remember: It is not as important how we start. It is more about how well we finish.

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ⁱ Ken Robinson at http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity#t-33752

ⁱⁱ Clyde Fant, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 1 (Westminster-John Knox, Louisville) 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bret Younger, "Beginnings" in *Ministry Matters*, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/2212/beginnings>