

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 3:21-23,4:1-13 *"Led By The Spirit"*

John the Baptist said of Jesus "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Jesus would immerse or inundate his followers in or with the Spirit, and achieve in reality what John could only perform symbolically – wash people clean from their sins, raise them from death to new life. But what would it be like to experience such an "immersion in the Spirit"? How would it show itself, and what would life be like afterwards? Jesus himself had an experience of baptism and the descent of the Spirit, so maybe we should look at that.

1) Jesus Is Baptized

On one particular day, amid the hundreds of ordinary people, mostly peasants, lining up on the river bank to be immersed in the Jordan, John recognizes his cousin Jesus. He is standing in line with all the others who are willing to show their repentance by being baptized. John thinks this is a little crazy: he has known Jesus since they were children, and he is sure that if anyone should be baptizing, it's Jesus who ought to baptize him. John tries to dissuade Jesus, but Jesus insists; and so he too goes down into the water with all the sinners, and rises to newness of life.

And on this day, something happens that had never happened before. It's not clear if

anyone but Jesus and John see and hear it, but heaven opens, a dove descends, and a voice says: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." John said: "I was told that the man on whom the Holy Spirit came down and remained is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit – this is the Son of God." Jesus has been anointed with the Holy Spirit at the start of his public ministry. He has received the affirmation of the Father that he is the Son, with whom the Father is well pleased.

So in Jesus' experience, the "baptism with the Holy Spirit" takes the form of him standing in solidarity with sinners in need of redemption; in fact "standing in the sinners' place," in the water, even though he was not a sinner. Jesus has the visible symbol in the dove of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him; and he hears the voice of God affirming him. What would you or I do, what would we think, if that had happened to us? How must Jesus have reacted? Not, to be sure, that we should try to "psychoanalyze" Jesus - but can we ask what, in his humanness, he experienced at this point?

2) Jesus Is Tested

The answer comes very quickly. The Spirit who has anointed Jesus leads him out into the desert for 40 days. He will symbolically re-enact Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, and the point of the experience is testing, trial, temptation. At the very start of his

mission, now empowered with the Spirit, Jesus must decide how he will proceed. His trust and obedience will be tested. These are called the temptations of the devil; you may say these are tests from God, you may say these are the trials of the human soul – here these are all the same. Who will Jesus be? What will he do? Whose agenda will he follow – his own, his Father's, the devil's?

It's clear to us from a human point of view, knowing how Jesus' public life will unfold, that Jesus could go in any number of directions at this point. He could become a Jewish insurrectionist. He could allow the crowds to make him "a king." He could remain an itinerant prophet and healer who lived in Galilee and the hill country of Judea, and help a lot of poor people. He could march into the bigger cities from Tyre to Tiberias to Jerusalem to Masada and stir up the crowds against the Roman occupation and the collaborators.

He could use his new "Spirit-power" to make bread or anything else he wanted appear miraculously, or he could trust God for his needs. He could become a national leader, even an international leader, or he could worship God his Father. He could make a spectacle of himself, or he could rest quietly in God's hands. So many choices, so many paths – and his soon-to-be-followers would have plenty of opinions too about what he should do and how he should do it. Any choice he made would be criticized by some people, even opposed by his friends.

At some level, a cosmic drama was being worked out in his own soul. The leading of the Holy Spirit, or the diversions of the devil? Would Jesus come through as the Son who trusted God and was obedient to the calling he knew deep inside, or would he be someone who was tossed and turned by every wind and wave of opinion, always

trying to find out who he was, never achieving anything much?

The answer, of course, was victory for God's plan, and for the combined power of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Jesus knew his way well enough already from years of studying the laws, the prophets, the writings, and now empowered by the Spirit, he stuck to it. He was faithful in all the ways Israel had failed to be in their 40 years of testing: they had doubted God's provision of food and water, Jesus did not; they had worshipped idols, Jesus would not bow down to Satan for all the world; they had tested God at the waters of Massah and Meribah but Jesus would not "test God" in any way. So he emerges from the desert ready to be "the true Israelite," the obedient "Servant of the Lord."

3) Our Deserts and Trials

So what can we learn from Jesus' experience about being a follower of his who is "baptized in (or with) the Holy Spirit"?

It might be that we will find ourselves called to do something that other people think is ridiculous. It could even be baptism – certainly for an adult that will likely get you derided by at least some work colleagues, maybe some of your family, even some other Christians. But there are times when you have to do what you know God has called you to do!

You may obey God so well that there are moments when you sense his "well done – I am pleased with you." It doesn't have to be what we usually call "spiritual" – like the Olympic athlete Eric Liddell, you might say "God has made me fast, and when I run I can feel his pleasure." God's smile is an incredible blessing, but for fallen humans it is also a danger. What follows may be the worst of trials, as we are tested by our own

fallen-ness, by the seductions and accusations of the devil, and by the permission of God, to see what we will do with God's approval. In fact any acquaintance with the biographies of the saints, or the lives of people who walk closely with God, quickly teaches us that every serious believer has to face going into the desert to be tested.

Most of you know what it's like to live at some point in the desert. Some of you are there now. Some of you are now in a good place in life, and grateful for it, but you can still remember what it was like to wander in the wilderness. The trials that face us are not so different from the ones Jesus faced. Will we use what strength and ability we have to satisfy or indulge our own needs? Will that always be the #1 issue for us: to have enough income, enough food, enough comfort... whatever it is, will that be what drives us? People who have grown up with very little are sometimes unable, all their lives, to forget the high value to them of every possession and every dollar. They don't waste anything, and they are angered by people who are careless with things or money.

What we are called to, of course, is a deep trust in God; a confidence born from his promises, and confirmed by life experiences, that he will carry us through and provide for our needs. So a life of limited and uncertain income sometimes teaches people that God can provide in the most unexpected ways – the check that arrives in the mail, the food left at the door, the clothes that come as gifts. *"Man does not live on bread alone,"* says Jesus, and his followers have to learn that lesson.

We may also find ourselves tempted, as Jesus was, to *"gain the whole world and lose our own souls."* There are plenty of ways to "worship the devil" and be richly rewarded. One newspaper column I read last week asked: *Why Are Rich People So Cheap?* You'd think

someone earning millions of dollars a year would pay their own taxes, and their cleaning ladies' Social Security contributions; but how often they don't! Jesus warned about the danger of "gaining the world but losing our own souls," and it's not too hard to do. At another level, we struggle with applying Christian principles and values in the working world. It can be hard to stand up for or even express our Christianity in some jobs. One person told me the symbol of the Germanic tribe that kept their "sword hands" out of the baptismal water rang very true, and that it often seemed as though their work lives were run on entirely different principles from their home and social and church lives. We have to recognize that these issues are tests, and in some cases temptations.

Or we may even find ourselves tempted to show off our "spirituality": to act with the kind of hubris that invites a fall, or to act as though "the rules don't apply to us because we are special." It is almost to "tempt God to take us down" because we push ourselves forward and upward. But we are called to be humble before God, not proud!

We have to remember that Jesus overcame his desert trials by his knowledge of the Word of God and the presence of the Spirit of God in his life. We are offered the same tools, and we are able to come through our trials strengthened and confirmed in our faith; as people who have shown their trust and obedience in God. Jesus could have done anything with the gifts he had: he chose to dedicate everything to the service and redemption of people like you and me – to stand beside us in the Jordan River, to walk with us through the desert, to die for us on the cross. He knows what it takes to emerge victorious, and he wants us to learn that too.

So let him plunge you in the waters and lead you through the deserts, and show you how the Spirit can sustain you.

Let us pray...