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January 7, 2018 – Epiphany/Bapt. of the Lord

**“About Twelve in All”**  
Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:9-11 (NKJV)

Today is a BUSY day in our church calendar. For one, it marks the day we observe not one, but *two* significant events in the historic life of the Christian Church: Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord. We will also be observing the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Ordination/installation of Elder leaders. (And, a much lesser event, but still important to the life of the LOCAL church: a congregational meeting after the service!)

You will notice that very little emphasis has been placed today on the observance of **Epiphany**. And it’s not because I have something against those ‘three Kings of Orient are’ that ‘followed the yonder star’ of the Christ Child. Indeed, like those three Magi, we ALL are ‘kings and queens’ of our own little worlds, and must be conscious of how WE TOO are called to follow the ‘star’ of our world, Jesus Christ. A journey of ‘followship’ that can also take US a LONG way... sometimes quite far from our homes of security and safety... AND **complacency**.

TODAY’S focus, however, will be on the **Baptism of our Lord**. Both of our day’s lectionary passages place great emphasis on the importance of our **baptism**.

A ‘baptismal identity’ that we probably don’t think of too much. C’mon, tell me... when was the last time you sat at your desk, or in line at the grocery, or at home in front of the TV/computer screen, and thought to yourself, “*Self... I am so glad to be a **baptized believer** in Jesus Christ?*” 😊

Well, here’s a few reasons that we SHOULD be more mindful of what it means to be **baptized in Christ**. For one, it is one of our only two sacraments... the only two to have been participated in by Christ Himself. (And the other one is...?) If it was important to Jesus, it sure should be important to US!

And just WHY was it important to our Lord to be baptized by John? As referred to by both Paul and Jesus, “**John baptized with a baptism of repentance.**” (Acts 19:4) Was Jesus in need of ‘repentance?!’ HARDLY! But, Jesus DID know about temptation, and the need to ‘turn away from,’ to ‘repent,’ from the influence of temptation...as he did when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness. By participating in the John’s ‘baptism of repentance,’ a **perfect** Jesus served

as an example to all of us **'imperfect'** followers of the importance of 'turning away' from influences of evil... of having 'washed away' that which might cause us to 'turn away' from Jesus. That God is the only One powerful enough... and loving enough... to accept us in spite of, and cleanse us from... the stain of our sins...

But what must not be lost in Jesus' baptism is what came next. That as Jesus came up out of the water, **"He saw... the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove."** (Mark 1:10) That along with our Lord's baptism of **water** also came His baptism by the **Holy Spirit**. Jesus, with a little 'assist' from John, demonstrated the importance that to live the Christian life as God intended, it was not merely enough to turn AWAY from the **power** of **sin**... but also to turn TO the **power** of God's **Spirit**. Not an 'either-or'... but rather, a 'both-and'...

Which brings us to Paul's experience in Ephesus. In that opening verse, we read that Paul, **"finding some disciples, said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'"** (Acts 19:1-2)

Now, it's probably just ME and my random thoughts, but I found that opening phrase interesting: **"finding some disciples."** Just HOW did he do that? How did he KNOW that they were 'disciples' of Jesus? Were they wearing blue polo shirts that had 'F.A.C.E' on them? (First Apostolic Church of Ephesus) Did he look up 'Christian Churches' in the Yellow Pages? Were they hanging out at 'Fishers of Men Wharf?' OK, I know... enough! But SERIOUSLY. How WOULD Paul have known? Perhaps he **overheard them talking** about this man **Jesus**. Perhaps they were **seen praying**, or bringing **comfort to a hurting** person, or **giving food** to a beggar. Obviously SOMETHING tipped Paul off as to their Christian faith. Which begs the question, 'how about you and me?' Could someone tell that WE are a 'disciple of Christ?' Perhaps, by overhearing us talk about Jesus? Witness us praying... in public? Giving comfort to someone who was hurting? Giving food to a homeless person? As an old saying goes, *'If someone were to accuse you of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict...?'*

Regardless, it doesn't take Paul long to get to heart of his concern about these 'new-born followers' of Christ. No mincing of words for Paul: **"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"** (Acts 19:2) To which those fellow 'disciples' just as openly replied: 'Holy Spirit?' **"We have not so much as heard whether there IS a 'Holy Spirit.'"** (Acts 19:2)

Wow. You know, we can talk about the differences in cultural 'context' between us and those first followers of Christ, but I'm afraid that the question and answer could be the same TODAY. Too many current 'believers' in Christ, if confronted about the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives, might share in that same response: ***"We have not so much as heard whether there IS a 'Holy Spirit.'"***

As you and I consider just what this baptismal font represents, we would likely talk about how our sins are washed away through our faith in Jesus Christ, who came to **die** for those sins that we might have **life**. The same Jesus who, like the one who came before Him, John the Baptist, implores his people to repent, to turn away from that which is not of God. But that's only the HALF of it. It's not only about turning AWAY from SIN... but turning TO the SAVIOR. John's baptism of **repentance** is INCOMPLETE without Jesus' baptism of **renewal**. The power of God's invigorating Spirit that carries us beyond our **past failures** to a **future hope**. It is that hope-filled, power-ful Spirit that is intended to be passed along, from one faithful believer to the next.

It is that vital role of each and every faithful follower of Christ to pass along a Godly heritage of Spirit-filled power that makes verse 6 of our Acts passage so >>>important: ***"And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them..."*** (Acts 19:6) One strong leader for God empowering others to take on the same mantle of spiritual leadership.

This notion of God using His 'chosen ones' to in turn 'choose others' to be 'set apart' for His service goes back to the times of Moses and Joshua, where God instructs Moses to ***"Lay hands on Joshua, in whom is the Spirit... and Moses laid hands on him, and commissioned him."*** (Numbers 27:18-22) This 'commissioning' goes on into New Testament times, such as when members of the church in Antioch laid hands on Saul (aka Paul) and his 'encourager,' Barnabas, and sent them off into the mission field. And before that, a young man named Stephen, and 6 others, were likewise 'handed off' to serve the needs of their community... chosen because of their ***"good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom."*** (Acts 6:6)

My point is this: just as Joshua... Saul... Barnabas... Stephen... and so many others faithful followers of God were empowered by the Spirit, and through the hands of those who had gone before, so too are WE called to be those same 'feet and hands of Jesus.' In today's

service, as we witness the commissioning of new Elders for the church, we pray that God's power... in Spirit and in truth... will indeed be 'passed along' from those who have 'gone before'... tomorrow's leaders being empowered by today's...

But even as we recognize the particular gifts of leadership bestowed on certain individuals, may we NEVER lose sight of the gifts given to EACH AND EVERY ONE of us to share with others. Just like those earliest believers, we too must strive to be followers of ***"good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom."***

And, that by the power of that same Holy Spirit, we must, in turn, pass along to others the love and strength that has been given to us. To **pray** God's healing for the hurting. To be that shoulder to **lean on** for another person's loss. To be that hand to **hold** for one who needs to know the comforting hand of the Almighty, who guides our own. Just as Paul was that 'conduit' for the Holy Spirit to enter into the life of others, so too are we called to be that 'conduit,' that 'channel' of God's love, strength, and peace. As you and I continue to seek to tap into the power, the 'spark' of God's Spirit... and, in the words of that old song, 'pass it on'... we, in effect, say to **others**... AND know for **ourselves**... the truth that the Father spoke so clearly to His Son: ***"You are my beloved Son... my beloved daughter... my beloved child... in whom I am well pleased."*** (Mark 1:11) As we look forward to that time when God will express His pleasure in our lives, may all of God's 'beloved children' say, AMEN!