

Baptism of our Lord B 2018

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized?

Did the earth move?

Did you catch on fire?

Did the Holy Spirit make you a prophet?

Now, we're not very stuffy around here,  
Even if our liturgy is formal  
And we hold what we do in a certain reverence.  
We're not stuffy,  
But we do have a comfort zone.

So if we hear a question  
like the one the apostle Paul asked  
when he met the believers in Ephesus –  
did you receive the Holy Spirit –  
and especially when we hear  
that those believers spoke in tongues and prophesied,  
then we may suspect  
that we're edging up close to one of our boundaries.

We love the Holy Spirit here;  
We name her and claim her.  
But do we let her rock our world?

I hope so,  
Because our world is already rocked,  
And shocked.  
We are on edge, uncertain;  
And though some of us are moved to action  
By the daily affronts and assaults of the way things are,  
Others are exhausted and in retreat.

I believe,  
I think  
We need the Holy Spirit  
To shake us back into shape.

So I hope this won't hurt too badly.

I'm going to ask the question again.

Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized?

You might say,  
Well, yes, and no.

Yes, because at your baptism  
All the grace and power of God  
Washed over you.  
At your baptism  
The heavens opened and God said,  
You are my beloved child,  
And I am pleased with you.  
At your baptism  
All the promises of God  
Found a new person  
In whom to unfold.  
Yes, you received the Holy Spirit.

Yes, and no.

No, because the moment of your baptism only marked,  
In a way we could see and touch,  
What has always been true.  
All the grace and power of God  
Have been washing over you  
Since the moment you began to be,  
Since the moment you began to take your place  
In a world that takes its shape and meaning  
From the love that makes life.

All the grace and power of God  
Has been washing over the whole world  
A wind sweeping across the water  
Since the very beginning,  
Since the moment when time began  
At the birth of light.

The Holy Spirit that shapes and tends the world  
was already yours,  
And you belonged to that unquenchable Spirit,  
Simply because you were born,  
And took in the breath of life.

The gift of your baptism

Is God's promise that you may take what is already yours,  
The incarnation and witness of Christ,  
The unquenchable life of the Holy One,  
In which all things are made new.  
You may take it, and make it yours.  
We remember this together,  
every time we gather at the water  
and give thanks,  
every time we renew our baptismal covenant.

We remember, and take the gift again today,  
If we dare.

Do we dare to get to know the Holy Spirit?  
Do we dare to let the Holy Spirit  
Shake us out of our well-meaning,  
Comfortable good intentions  
And spur us on to be changers and renewers of the world?

When Paul came to Ephesus,  
He found some disciples  
Who had heard of Jesus,  
Believed his truth,  
And wanted to follow in the new way  
He promised.

And so, quite reasonably,  
They had received the baptism  
That was offered them,  
The baptism of John  
Which symbolized  
Their desire to turn around, to repent of their sins  
And live a new life.

That's a good thing.  
They made a new beginning,  
They found a community of fellowship and prayer.  
They warmed their hands at the fire of life.

But when Paul asked them  
If they had received the Holy Spirit,  
They had no idea what to say, except  
We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.  
Who is the Holy Spirit?

And then, at last, when he laid hands on them,

They caught fire.  
They were filled with words  
For what they saw and heard,  
And life was never the same.

Did that happen to you?  
Could it happen to you now?  
Could the Holy Spirit  
Be real in your life?

Who is the Holy Spirit?

How to speak of the elusive, invisible  
Power of God?

The gospel writers speak of the rustling of wings,  
Or the flickering of a flame.  
Renaissance painters  
Would show the curl of smoke  
From a candle that has just gone out.  
The Quakers speak of the pounding of the heart  
That cannot be denied.

We may not have words ready to hand,  
But we can find the Spirit in our lives.  
Each of us has known a moment  
When the Holy Spirit  
Guided us and gave us new life.

When we take a deep breath,  
And bite back a hurtful word,  
The Holy Spirit is at work in us.

When we sigh,  
Set our feet to the floor  
And take the first steps into a day that seems too hard to bear,  
The Holy Spirit comforts us and gives us strength.

When we catch our breath  
And blurt out the first awkward words  
That ask for forgiveness,  
The Holy Spirit moves between us.

When we look beyond  
Our well-meaning attempts to be fair  
And seek the roots of justice,

The Holy Spirit has a way to go to work.

All these things can happen in us and through us.

We do know the Holy Spirit.  
And if we dare,  
We can keep on looking for words for what we know,  
And ways to make it real in the world.

Nine centuries ago,  
The abbess Hildegard,  
Composer, artist, scientist,  
wise woman and friend of God,  
found words for what she knew.  
Here's what she says,  
In one of her many hymns:

Holy Spirit,  
Giving life to all life,  
Moving all creatures,  
Root of all things,  
Washing them clean,  
Wiping out their mistakes,  
Healing their wounds,  
You are our true life,  
Luminous, wonderful,  
Awakening the heart from its ancient sleep.

That Spirit is ours from our birth,  
Put into our hands at our baptism.

That Spirit is waiting to go to work in us now.

Are you so worn down by what you see and hear,  
What you feel all around you,  
That hope is flickering on the edge,  
Close to going out?  
The Holy Spirit can remind you  
That hope is not a feeling,  
But a virtue to be claimed and tended,  
A virtue for which we pray,  
A virtue we sustain.

Are you so angry at what you see and hear,  
What you feel all around you,  
That compassion is fading?

Are you isolated and appalled,  
Resentful or exhausted?  
The Holy Spirit can remind you  
That we are a community sustained and empowered  
And bound together,  
Yes, by righteous anger  
And faithful witness,  
But most of all  
By the mysterious gift of the divine self  
Contained, of all things,  
In a bit of bread or sip of wine.

The Holy Spirit is calling us  
To be transformed by what we receive,  
To become the body of Christ:  
To be truth speakers,  
Justice seekers,  
Co-creators of a better world  
Than the one offered us by those in power.  
Discoverers of mystery.  
Delighters in beauty.  
Defenders of the downtrodden.

The Holy Spirit is calling us  
To embrace what is already true,  
What has always been true:  
We are God's beloved,  
Already and forever,  
No matter what.

This is the truth  
that the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts,  
a truth that sets us free  
to become what we receive.

Jesus knew that truth  
When he came to the River Jordan.  
It set him free  
To become what he received,  
All the fullness of God.

In a world that cries fake and foul,  
That builds walls,  
That avoids responsibility,  
That smears honesty  
And violates integrity,

The Holy Spirit is here to make us strong.

We have something to do.  
And we can't do it alone.  
But we have everything we need.  
God has promised,  
And God is faithful.

Today, again,  
As we renew our baptismal covenant,  
We remember,  
And renew the promise  
We see and touch  
In the waters of baptism.

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· Hildegard of Bingen, trans. Stephen Mitchell