

TITLE : SPLASHED WITH THE SPIRIT**READINGS: Isa. 43:1-7, Ps.29, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.**

Bob Beasley attends a Baptist church in Canada. They baptize by immersion. One Sunday while Bob drove his family home from church, his little daughter asked, "Daddy, why did the pastor push that guy under the water? Why, daddy?" Bob's wife attempted to answer little Rena, but she just wouldn't be satisfied. Later Bob and his wife made another attempt. They talked from the Baptist perspective about sin and told Rena that when people decide to live for Jesus and "be good" they are baptized. They told her the water symbolizes Jesus washing us from sin and people come out of the water "clean" and they are going to try to be "good" from then on. Little Rena thought for a moment and said, "Why didn't pastor just spank him?"

Don't you wonder why the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus comes so quickly after Christmas? Jesus sure does seem to grow up fast! Well, in the early days of the Christian church they didn't celebrate Christmas at all. Everything started with the Baptism of Jesus, for that was the beginning of his public life and ministry. Remember, too, that little children during Jesus' time did not enjoy any honor, status or prestige. Adult men ruled and were honored, no one else, not women and certainly not children. It is also important for us to take note of whose Gospel account we are reading. Only Matthew and Luke talk about the birth of Jesus and the fullest treatment is in Luke. It is Luke who wants us to see that these are manifestations of who Jesus is. The birth of Jesus is an epiphany. God comes to earth in this child, says Luke, the Angel announces it, the chorus of Angels sing his glory, shepherds come to adore and the star shines over Bethlehem. After eight days another epiphany of Jesus in the Temple when his parents took him to be circumcised and to officially proclaim his name, Jesus. It is here that the prophet Simeon proclaims who Jesus is and not only Simeon but Anna as well. Then another epiphany, when he was 12 years old at his Bar mitzvah , he astonished the learned Rabbis. And now we see the great John the Baptist who is not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals proclaiming who Jesus is. Over and over again Luke drives home his point, here is our savior, our Messiah, here is the one who was promised by Isaiah and all the prophets. He is the one who will splash you with the Spirit.

It is in Luke that the Holy Spirit occupies a very critical theme. For the Holy Spirit is the significant agent in the ministry not only of Jesus, but also of his church. It is here at Jesus' baptism that we see the Holy Spirit descend over Jesus and validate this event. Then it is the Father's voice that affirms this to be sacred and true. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Lk.3:22. This is truly

an epiphany revealing our God who comes to walk with his broken people, who embraces sinners and outcasts and invites them to dine at his table of grace.

Wouldn't it be wonderful and so much simpler if we could hear God speak to us? We live in a culture that is so noisy that it may be impossible to distinguish God's voice. But just stop and listen. God's voice is spoken to us throughout our lives. Just look at our Psalm today, "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters... the Lord, over mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty." Ps.29:3-4. God's voice is the first spoken over the waters of our baptism. It is the last voice spoken over us at our death. It is the voice we should hear each day when we renew our baptismal covenant. In baptism, God calls you by name. "You are my daughter. You are my son." Just as in our first reading from Isaiah today, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine." Isa.43:1. In our baptism we begin our committed life for it comes from the commitment God first made to us his children in whom he delights. That is our identity. After any other commitment in our lives, we remain the dearly beloved of God. Loved by the Father, saved by the Son, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

When I was a hospice chaplain I was asked to visit a man in the Glenoma area near Packwood, who was dying of pancreatic cancer. When I came to the home, his wife met me on the porch and said, "Chaplain, I am so worried for my husband, he has never been baptized and I fear for his salvation. Would you please baptize him?" I told her I would be happy to baptize him, but wanted to get to know him first. After a few visits, Jack and I had gotten to feel comfortable with each other. We had talked about Jesus and repentance, salvation and had prayed together many times. I then told Jack that his wife was very concerned that he had never been baptized. He told me that he had accepted Jesus long ago and was totally committed to Christianity and felt he was baptized, although not formally, and really didn't need to go through the rite. The next day Jack slipped into a coma and remained in that state. On the second day at 4:00 am the hospice team was called to Jack's home. He was actively dying. His family and the hospice team were gathered around his hospital bed. A small lamp gave a gentle light for the room. Jack was lying with his upper body a bit elevated so he could breathe easier. Suddenly he opened his eyes and looked at his niece standing at the foot of his bed. "Mary," he said, "would you please move aside, Jesus is coming for me in the bright light behind you and you are in his way." None of us in the room saw the bright light. Mary stepped to one side, Jack's eyes looked upward from where he was lying, then gently and peacefully closed, and he died.

Later I talked with his wife. I told her that we had talked about the ceremony of baptism and felt he didn't need to go through the rite. I assured her that I was convinced that Jack was with Jesus in his Father's house. She, too, agreed. He most certainly had heard God's voice and was splashed with the Spirit. I would be the very last one to tell anyone that Baptism is not important or necessary in our Christian

walk. It most certainly is! But I also believe there may be some exceptions. My friend in Glenoma being one.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is a lady who wanted to be baptized and understood that she should be, but was deathly afraid. She met with me to discuss her terrible fears. It seemed that she had two brothers who both drown together in a lake and from the time of that incident, she was terrified of water and the fear of drowning. I explained that in baptism water has a destructive force in which sin is destroyed and a life-giving force which fills us with God's grace. I also assured her that I did not need to immerse her but pour the baptismal water over her. She knew that her two brothers represented for her the cleansing power of baptism for they had lived very evil lives and both were trying to escape from the police when they drown. She saw the meaning of new life poured into her, lost her fear, and was baptized.

The water of baptism can be a powerful force in our lives. As our Gospel says today, "I baptize you with water; but one who is greater than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Lk.3:16. If we open ourselves to God's voice and hear him, if we remind ourselves of the cleansing power of our baptism then we can acknowledge that we, too, have been cleansed from sin, filled with God's grace, and splashed with the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Pastor Barney