

**First Sunday after the Epiphany – January 7, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
Luke 3: 15-16,21-22, Jesus is Baptized**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

From the Gospel: ***“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”***

I suspect that most of you are not in the habit of writing sermons, and neither was I until recently. When I started doing so regularly, I told myself to work about three weeks ahead, so that if something came up in my day job, or I got a cold, I would not find myself standing here relying entirely on the grace of God to provide a sermon.

It's not that God couldn't do it, but it's considered poor form not to at least try! And so I had this sermon pretty much ready to go. And then I attended a meeting a Diocesan House, and I thought of you, and had to re-write the sermon. I'll explain why in a minute.

This morning's Gospel recounts the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan. As you read the passage – and especially if you include the verses that are omitted – it is apparent that Luke sees an element in baptism which includes judgment – separation of wheat from the chaff. So when the part we did read speaks of baptism with fire, the idea is that the chaff – the unaccepted part of the harvest – will be cast into the fires of destruction.

But that's just Luke's take on it. All four of the canonical Gospels recount the baptism of Jesus, but each takes a slightly different tack. Scholars tell us that's because each of the Gospel writers had targeted a different audience or a different focus for his story of the Christ. It is, I think, a strong argument for the way in

which Episcopalians approach Scripture. Just walking away with a literal reading, especially when there are four of them, is not really letting the Bible speak to us.

Look at the four writers. Mark has John wanting Jesus to baptize him, not the other way round, but Jesus talks him out of it.¹ Matthew implies that Jesus is confirmed in his own ministry at the time of his baptism, leading to a whole raft of questions about Jesus and his knowledge of his relationship to God.² The modern phrasing would be “what did Jesus know and when did he know it?”

John introduces the wonderful analogy of Jesus as the Lamb of God.³ And Luke, from which we read today, makes it clear that the image of the descending dove, representing the Holy Spirit, occurs after the baptism itself, while Jesus is at prayer,⁴ not at the moment of baptism itself.

Little wonder, then, that the church has wrestled over time with just what baptism is and what comes with it.

There is no question that the early church viewed baptism as a rite of initiation, of becoming a member of the group of believers. There was also general agreement that baptism was something performed once, and that it conferred some sort of realignment of the person with God, that it established a relationship which was permanent. And it was the generally-held view in the early church that baptism involved a forgiveness of sin. This led to some people waiting until near death to be baptized, in order to be as free of sin as possible when they passed from this life into the eternal.

¹ Mark 1:9-11

² Matthew 3:13-17

³ John 1:29-34

⁴ Luke 3:21-22

Finally, it is clear from what we know of the early Church that baptism was focused on Easter, and that it was seen as a dying to the old life and a rebirth to the new life in Christ. Baptism was not entered into lightly, and a great deal of preparation, including study and prayer, was required.

But, as they say, that was then and this is now.

So what is baptism? What is it in today's church? Today is celebrated in the church year as the day on which our Lord was baptized, and we will, as a congregation, renew our baptismal vows. But what do those vows say about us and about what we are to do?

Now this is the place where I had to re-write the sermon. Our discussion at Diocesan House, which involved the bishop, the archdeacon, the dean and registrar of *Equipping the Saints*, and me, was about how to get the word out about what is known as "baptismal ministry." Someone made the point that the national church had talked about baptismal ministry for a long time, but it really hadn't gotten out "into the pews" – that's you in case you missed it.

And then I thought about you, the people of Ascension Church in Hinton, West Virginia. You have been living out baptismal ministry for years! Because of a lot of circumstances, some of them quite painful, you were faced with a choice. You could abandon your church, or you could figure out what needed to be done, talk it over with one another, pray about it, and get on with the job.

It would have been completely presumptuous for me to tell you what baptismal ministry is all about. You're doing it in a wonderful way! And you've been doing it for a long time. This is, after all, the church which needed a basement, and you dug it yourselves. You're already where the theologians in the church think everyone ought to be.

Even a generation ago⁵, Episcopalians might not have recognized this kind of work by lay persons as ministry. Ministry was the work of a minister, a Father, who baptized and blessed, married and buried, visited the sick, preached, and led the Sunday service, which three out of four Sundays in a month was usually Morning Prayer.

Laities were expected to follow the Ten Commandments, submit to spiritual authorities, attend worship on Sunday, christen their children, often in private ceremonies, raise those children in the faith, and give financially to the church. Holy Communion seemed to many an affair for the “continual strengthening and refreshing” of the individual’s soul, and less the corporate experience we see today. In the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*, the “bounden duty” of church membership consisted in following Christ, attending worship and “to work and pray and give for the spread of his kingdom.”

The kingdom implications of the earlier catechism were brought center stage in the prayer book we now use. The explicit shift to a baptismal and eucharistic ecclesiology, which is the fancy word for that part of theology dealing with the nature of the church and what it means for the church to be the “body of Christ,” the shift is evident in the new set of questions in the Catechism that replaces definitions of individual duty:

Question. What is the mission of the Church?

Answer. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Question. How does the Church pursue its mission?

⁵ This section is based on “Toward a Theology of Ministry,” by the Standing Commission on Ministry Development found at http://www.episcopalchurch.org/mdl_62710_ENG_HTML.htm.

Answer. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace and love.

Question. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

Answer. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

This statement of God's reconciling mission to the world has challenged, and, I regret to say, at times divided, the Episcopal Church, as it calls us to discover new ways of understanding ourselves as messengers and ministers of God's kingdom.

And the statement challenges us, here in Hinton and throughout this diocese today. What is the relationship among the members of the body of Christ? Is there something special about those of us who are ordained, and, by implication, something less special about anyone else?

Many of us who grew up in the Episcopal Church remember the days of "Father knows best" as it applied to the church. We used to think of the body of Christ, the Church, as a pyramid with the laity at the broad base, deacons and priests above them, and bishops atop the whole thing. Let me now suggest a different image.

Think of a round table with four chairs, each of equal size and comfort. This nice chair up next to the altar would be fine. No chair has better padding than another, nor is any slightly higher, nor different in any way, from the others. The four chairs represent the alignment of the body of Christ to carry out the mission of the Church. We are all equal members, each with important, but different, work to do.

The last time I was here, I spoke briefly about how impressive this congregation is to me. You have been and will be asked to deal with a lot of things using your own resources, and you have done so, and will continue to do it. I am absolutely delighted to be a new part of your ministry in this part of God's kingdom.

The journey on which we are embarking involves living out the new life we took on at baptism. We will do it individually, as a group. Let me say that again: we will do our tasks of ministry individually, and in companionship with one another, as the Body of Christ.

How will we do that? And for that matter, how have you been doing it all this time? One answer would be that different people have stepped up and taken on the work that needed to be done. Another way of looking at it is that you took seriously your commitment to God to work for the spread of his Gospel, and God took seriously his promise in Christ Jesus to support you in that work.

It is a powerful combination, one which changes lives and moves mountains. We have been baptized with the Holy Spirit to take the Word of God outside these doors into the world.

Are you ready for the trip? It's something you might keep in mind as you recite the Baptismal Covenant. I think we are ready, and pray that God speeds us on the journey!