

First Sunday after Epiphany 2021

10 January 2021

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church

Greenville, Al

[www.stthomasgreenville.org](http://www.stthomasgreenville.org)

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### Readings

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1: 4-11 NRSV

Before I begin narrowing our focus this morning, I want to acknowledge that there are so many important theological truths found in today's readings.

We could discuss John the Baptist and his being the bridge between the Old Testament prophets and the New Covenant (Matthew 11:9-10, Luke 7:26); we could discuss God anointing Jesus with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38).

And each one of these topics is very important to our understanding as believers.

But this morning, we will focus on increasing our understanding of the difference between water baptism unto repentance and the baptism of the Holy Spirit and how each is important to our daily lives as Christians.

We do not have time this morning to delve deeply into establishing these baptisms as two separable acts; but I will offer two passages, in addition to our reading from Acts 19, for you to read and pray over later to gain insight on this.

First, Acts 2 begins with Jesus' disciples receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Later in this same chapter, after Peter had been testifying about Jesus to the crowd, the people asked Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

So here we see water baptism unto repentance, and then the gift of the Holy Spirit being given.

In Acts chapters 10 and 11, we find the story of the Holy Spirit leading the Apostle Peter to the house of the centurion Cornelius.

In Acts 10:34, as Peter was testifying to the people of Cornelius' household he said, "You know the message he (the Lord) sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – He is Lord of all. That message spread through Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power;"

Skipping ahead a few verses to Acts 10:44 we read,

"While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

Here we see the gift of the Holy Spirit – this baptism in the Holy Spirit John spoke of – happening before water baptism as Peter preached to Cornelius and his household – and the Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that this should happen to Gentiles, but I imagine they were also astounded because this broke from the pattern they had witnessed regarding the order in which these baptisms had been occurring.

And I want us to especially note that Peter did not say, well, they've received the Holy Spirit, so they don't need water baptism.

Both baptisms are needful and necessary.

I commend to you to read Acts 10-11:18 in the next day or two.

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Now that we have tilled the soil...let us return to Mark 1:4-11.

John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of repentance – a baptism of confession and cleansing from the sins of our carnal nature.

This baptism ritually symbolized not only the putting off of the sinful nature of the flesh, but it also symbolized a reorientation of one's will to being subservient to God's will; to placing one's self under the authority of God.

This baptism prepared the way for the Lord to begin the work of spiritual formation and sanctification in a believer's life.

Some of our members who participated in the small group study where we discussed repentance might remember that the Greek word that is translated as "repentance" is metanoia, which denotes someone experiencing a transformative change or conversion, a total reorientation of their life.

Metanoia produces a change that is evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit in all areas of a believer's life.

When I think of the way John's baptism of repentance prepares our hearts and lives for the Lord I think of Jesus' teaching in Luke 11:24-26 regarding the house from which the unclean spirit had gone out.

John's baptism of repentance was, and is, like the house being swept clean and emptied of all that does not bring glory to God.

John's baptism is like the house being cleaned to prepare for Jesus to move in as the new Lord of the house; not as a houseguest, where things are temporarily put into closets with the intention of their being taken back out once the guest leaves.

Jesus then said in the teaching about the house that had been swept clean, that the spirit returned to find "the house," swept and put in order, but it was unoccupied – no new Lord had been invited in.

It was as though the person cleaning the house stopped in mid-process.  
(Mark 4:1-20, The Parable of the Sower).

The house was cleaned and emptied, but for what purpose?

John's baptism of repentance was, and is, the sweeping of the house and the preparation for inviting the Lord to become the head of the household.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the spiritual power by which the house – now prepared for the Lord – is refurnished with holy and wholesome furnishings that are pleasing to God and give glory to His name.

In John 14:23 Jesus promised, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

When we take this understanding of what was accomplished by John’s baptism, and through the work of the gift of the Holy Spirit, and consider what it means for our lives, we are reminded of the important work of parents, Godparents and of the faith community when it comes to responsibility for building up the faith of children baptized under our witness and covenant agreement to journey with them.

When infants are baptized, they have not had a chance to accumulate items in their “house” that might create a barrier or stumbling block in their relationship with the Lord.

But, we know as parents, Godparents and adult guardians of their faith that the world and their own egos will soon begin working to move those things into their house.

When we consider the relationship of worship and reverence we are called to teach our children to have with the Lord, we can even transition this word “house” to “temple” as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 3:16 when he said, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

So we are called to help our children furnish their “house,” God’s temple, with those things that are pleasing to the Lord, just as we continue on with this lifelong process of our own sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit’s counsel and guidance directing our lives.

There will be plenty of times when both our children, and we ourselves, try to sneak past the master of the house with something that the world says is good, or with something that feeds the appetites of the flesh, or builds up ego and denounces humility, or that the enemy convinces them, or us, is harmless.

It is going to happen.

Our response needs to come from our baptismal covenant of repentance and our staying open to the power of the gift of the Holy Spirit working in us.

Both have everything to do with the ongoing work of sanctification that God does with us throughout our lives because this is where our commitment begins.

When we repent and are cleansed of sin and commit to holding God's will as a priority over our own will and ego, we are making a commitment about what we'll allow into our "house."

Throughout our lives there will be times when we really want to bring something in that we should not.

The enemy will make it look appealing and try to confuse us about its potential for damaging our relationship with God and with those He calls us to love.

The world will say everyone else has one in their house – this excuse will start early with your children through peer pressure.

Our baptism signifies our continuing commitment to first sit in counsel with the Lord as we're making decisions about the furnishings of our house.

And having our children baptized – our speaking baptismal vows on their behalf – means we have committed to training them to live this same way.

And it really is much simpler than we like to pretend.

A baptismal covenant agreement with God means that you strive to live a life that honors God as the Lord of your house.

A baptismal covenant with God means that you strive to be able to set all things in your life square in the middle of the living room floor with God and Jesus watching and have peace with God about whatever it is because the Holy Spirit guided your decision, not your own ego or desires or imaginings.

This process of sanctification through our continuing baptismal commitment to repentance and renewal is simple, but not easy –

But thanks be to God we are equipped through both the water and Holy Spirit to live lives pleasing unto God. Amen.