

Sermon Notes – January 7, 2018
“Jesus’ Baptism”
Brian Walton

Candles are burning and the walls are covered in black sheets. People are sitting in a circle and periodically chant a familiar phrase. Greek letters are hung in conspicuous places. New-comers are offered the secret handshake and pledge to maintain the group’s traditions and to observe a code of secrecy. Sometimes there are strange clothes to be worn, obstacle courses to be negotiated or copious amounts of alcohol to be consumed. Such are the initiation rituals for many university fraternities.

Today’s scriptures point us toward an initiation ritual that originated in the earliest days of the Christian movement. We read of John the Baptist dunking people in the waters of the Jordan River to symbolize their renewed commitment to the Jewish faith. John declares that there is one coming after him who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit. Jesus arrives and requests to be baptized by John. As Jesus arises from the water a dove appears and a voice says: “this is my beloved ...” Fast forward five years in Biblical time and we come to the second reading. A group of ‘freshmen’ want to enter the new Christian community. St. Paul tells them that they need to be baptized in the name of Jesus and to receive the Holy Spirit. When their baptism is complete, it is said that they ‘speak in tongues’ and ‘prophecy’.

Nearly every Christian church throughout history has adopted baptism as the initiation ritual into Christian community. Many churches call baptism a sacrament, including our own. A sacrament is described as a visible sign – namely, the pouring, dunking or sprinkling of water ... of

an invisible grace - the love of God which we can't literally see. Baptism is a visible sign of an invisible grace. Despite this spiritual interpretation baptism has often defaulted to an initiation ritual.

Until the modern era Roman Catholics understood baptism as initiation not only into the church, but into heaven itself, causing them to lament the souls of unbaptized children. Those known as Anabaptists including Pentecostals, Baptists, Mennonites and others insisted that only adults proclaiming belief in Jesus were eligible for baptism. Typical of our United Church we remained open to both influences. We welcome children through infant baptism as well as adults who profess their faith through adult baptism and confirmation.

My guess is that almost every person in this room has been baptized. Most of you will have been presented for baptism by your parents – as much to celebrate your birth, as to initiate you into the life of the church. In fact, if you were baptized as an infant, you aren't considered a full member of the United Church until you confirm the baptismal vows made by your parents. In the United Church initiation, can be a two-stage process – welcome into the community when you are an infant and acceptance of full responsibility after confirmation. Full membership includes the eligibility to hold office or to participate in important votes, such as the hiring of a new minister.

I've become ambivalent about baptism. Over the years I have baptized many children presented by their parents, often at Grandma's request, who never appear in Sunday School or church again. Yet, I have a nostalgia about baptism that causes me to lament that none of my own grandchildren have been baptized. I checked the Baptismal records of St. Martin's this week. I discovered that in 1989 when I joined St. Martin's

there were 26 baptisms, in 2017 there was only one. Although the numbers vary a bit over the years, the trend is obvious. Perhaps it's a good thing. Perhaps it's good that baptism is no longer a societal expectation. Perhaps it's a good thing that my grandchildren aren't baptized simply to warm Grandpa's heart. Perhaps initiation rights are a thing of the past. The baptisms described in this morning's scripture are anything but initiation rights – they are apocalyptic moments, life changing events, new beginnings.

The group baptized by St. Paul respond with ecstatic reactions babbling in strange languages and prophesying about the future. Their commitment puts them at risk of imprisonment and even death. This baptism was no casual commitment to please grandma. In Mark's story, Jesus baptism is a watershed moment. To Mark, Jesus is an unknown, a nobody-special, prior to his baptism. After baptism Jesus emerges as a critic of societies failings, as a healer, a wisdom teacher and a movement founder. From his baptism until his arrest, he turns people's understanding about God upside down. Now that was a baptism!

These events are named "baptism by the Spirit". For some it resulted in ecstatic speech. For Jesus it resulted in a life dedicated to Love and justice. I asked folks in our spiritual conversation groups if their lives had been changed at baptism – most were baptized as infants and couldn't recall a thing about it. Gradually the group concluded that baptism by the Spirit, that life-transforming spiritual awakenings are not often the result of a church liturgy and the sprinkling of water. Those present shared stories of decision making – of moving to a first job and meeting a group of like-minded friends and feeling the call of the spirit. A woman spoke of her son, who was not baptized as an infant, but was

propelled by the Spirit toward baptism after he moved away to university. Many others spoke of how struggle or despair had awakened them to the life of the Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit results in an awakening to a new way of being in the world.

In 1896 an American preacher penned a novel entitled *In His Steps*. The novel depicts an itinerant labourer who knocks on the door of the local preacher busy writing his sermon. The preacher dismisses the labourer's request for some food. The following Sunday the labourer appears in church. He confronts the congregation with the difference between their professed beliefs and their actions. Various members of the church respond by pledging to ask themselves a seemingly simple question, "What would Jesus do?" in every situation and relationship for the following year. In the novel, lives are changed. In the real world, this book and its penetrating question sold over 30 million copies. There is no cookie-cutter answer to the question, "What would Jesus do?" for lives and situations are as varied as there are people. Yet pausing to reflect on this question in every instance of living would be life changing. I've wonder how my own spiritual life would change, I've wondered how my baptismal promises would be enlivened if I asked myself, "What would Jesus do?" at the beginning of each day. "What would Jesus do?" on a downtown street corner, after a dispute with a colleague, when I visit my financial advisor or enter a voting booth, as I contemplate retirement or respond to a request from the church or the Food Bank or World Vision. How would my life change if I always asked, "What would Jesus do?" We know what happened to Jesus' life after his baptism. What is happening to ours?

I recently heard someone suggest that what is wrong with the United Church is that it has no urgency. We cannot imagine anything that urgently requires our response. Perhaps that is why people are not coming here to be baptized or looking in our midst for the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we are too comfortable, content with initiation rituals rather than transformation, we have a sense of belonging but may not remember who we belong to. A few weeks ago some people told me they participate in the church for a sense of community and to ponder life's mysteries. Me too. But I want more than that for my grandchildren. If perchance they should every be baptized, really baptized by the Holy Spirit, I hope they would set out to change the world. I hope they would be inspired to bring love and justice to all they meet, maybe even to allow the question "what would Jesus do" to guide their lives. In this world of endless competition, of threats of war, of exploitation of humans and their bodies we need someone to ask, "What would Jesus do?" Why not us? Come Holy Spirit, come and baptize us in your way today. Amen.