

## SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

# What Are You Expecting?

The First Sunday After Epiphany

January 8, 2012

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Acts 19:1-7

**W**hile Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." <sup>3</sup> Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." <sup>4</sup> Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied-- <sup>7</sup> altogether there were about twelve of them.

As always, our gospel for the First Sunday After Epiphany is the account of Jesus' baptism. It's one of the Sundays we set aside for baptisms, and today we'll be baptizing little John Sampson Piersol and Avery Lee West. Baptisms are a happy family event, with photos of babies wearing heirloom baptismal dresses, a family gathering afterward, baptism gifts, and so on. And well they should be when we consider how important baptism into Jesus Christ really is. It's the sign of an unrepeatable, once-for-all turnaround in a person's life. It's a sign that a person says, "No" to the sin and darkness of this world and commits him or herself completely to Christ by accepting Christ's commitment to us. Baptism is a "signing over" of a person to God.

John the Baptist was baptizing people who were confessing their sins and committing to repent, to turn back to God once and for all. Was Jesus a likely candidate? He had nothing to repent of. He is without sin. He didn't need to turn

his life around to go back to God; he is God. Jesus allowed John to baptize him into our sinful, defective human race. He immersed Jesus into the human condition with all its grief and spitefulness and self-centered rebellion against God. In Matthew's account, John objects, but Jesus tells him, **"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."** (Matthew 3:15)

Jesus' perfect righteousness compels him "sign himself over," to commit himself to the salvation of the unrighteous human race. He commits himself to them by being baptized into them. His commitment carries him through his ministry of freeing people from the powers of evil and eventually to his death for sinful humanity on the cross, and his defeat of sin and death in his resurrection. It will reach its destiny in his complete renovation of the universe populated by his recreated people.

In Jesus, God's supernatural holy power is forcibly entering this dark world. That's why Mark says Jesus **"saw the heavens torn apart"** when the Holy Spirit came down on him and his Father endorsed him with **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"**. It is the Holy Spirit active in Jesus whose power drives him into the wilderness to overcome temptation by Satan. It is the Holy Spirit who guides and empowers Jesus to do his Father's work in this world by confronting and defeating the powers of darkness throughout his ministry. It is the Holy Spirit who raises his lifeless corpse to eternal and radiant life after his death on the cross.

Baptism marks that turnaround where Jesus enters our life by faith to enable us to live his life and do his Father's work in this world. This brings us to our reading from Acts 19, to Paul's encounter with these twelve disciples in Ephesus who have received John's baptism: the Ephesus 12. We need a little background. Towards the end of the previous chapter we learn that Paul had done some preaching in Ephesus, and then left. While Paul was out of town, Apollos came to Ephesus. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria in Egypt, who was **"powerful in the Scriptures"** but had only been baptized with John the Baptist's baptism. Apollos was accurately and very effectively teaching in the synagogue about Jesus from the Scriptures. Paul's friends Priscilla and Aquila gave Apollos some more instruction, and he decided to go to Corinth. The believers in Ephesus gave him a letter of recommendation, and sent him off.

That's where our reading begins. Paul comes back to Ephesus and encounters these twelve disciples who, like Apollos, have only received John's baptism. John's baptism has three elements. First, it's an unrepeatable, once-for-all turnaround from our ways to God's ways, **"a baptism of repentance for the**

**forgiveness of sins**". Second, it looks forward to believing in the coming one, Jesus the Messiah; and part of that is third, receiving Christ's Holy Spirit.

Apollos and the Ephesus 12 had both received John's baptism, but notice the difference between them. Apollos is living out all three elements of having received John's baptism: he's turned his life around to where he's traveling around preaching; he's believing in Jesus from the Scriptures, and in Acts 18:25 Luke says that Apollos was "burning in the Spirit" to proclaim Jesus from the Scriptures. The Ephesus 12 have the first element of John's baptism: they have apparently turned their lives around enough to see themselves as a community or a group, but they don't seem to know about the rest of what John dedicated his life to proclaim: Jesus, whom John said **"will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."** So when Paul asks them, **"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?"** they're baffled. They say, **"No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."** So Paul explains that John's whole point was to prepare people to believe in Jesus, who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. After teaching that was no doubt more complete than our text suggests, Paul baptizes them into Jesus Christ, and they receive the Holy Spirit.

Paul's question tells us two things. First, that receiving the Holy Spirit is part and parcel of faith in Jesus. He assumes that if they'd received the Holy Spirit, certainly they knew about Jesus, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And second, Paul assumes that a person knows whether or not they have received the Holy Spirit. Although John's baptism is once-for-all and nonrepeatable, this is a special case. Paul rebaptizes these people to "sign them over" to Jesus Christ. Somehow they had missed faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit when they had received John the Baptist's baptism. Apollos wasn't rebaptized, nor were the apostles, because their turnaround was a turning to Christ in faith accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

When Paul encountered these disciples, he was expecting that they could give some account of receiving the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. They couldn't. They had apparently done their best to turn from their ways to God's ways, but they'd missed the rest of John the Baptist's message. They didn't know about Jesus and his forgiveness for their sins or his desire to baptize them with his own Holy Spirit. They must have been committed, but they had no relationship with God or sense of God's indwelling strength or guidance.

Jesus' coming was the forcible entry of God's supernatural holy power into this dark world. In his baptism, we see how God chose to make that happen. Heaven is torn open and the Holy Spirit himself comes to inhabit a human being, the Son of God. But the Father intends that all who believe in his Son will receive the Holy Spirit as well. He intends to live in us, to enlighten our minds so the

same Holy Spirit who inspires the Scriptures speaks to us through them. He intends to live in us so that our prayers in the Spirit follow his will as he as outlined it in his word, and bring the sure results he promises. He intends to work in us to conform us more and more to the people he created us to be. He intends that like Jesus and the disciples in Ephesus, we have an effect on the environment of this fallen world we live in. He intends that his people spread kingdom of holiness and love and forgiven sins into this dark world.

Today we are “signing over” Sam and Avery to Jesus Christ in baptism. After they’re baptized in the name of the Trinity, we’ll anoint them with oil and pronounce that they are **“sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”** We are administering a sign that they will one day make an unrepeatable, once-for-all commitment to Jesus Christ and receive Christ’s saving commitment to them. This baptismal liturgy is not magic. I doubt their behavior will improve as a result. It is only a sign. A sign is nothing in itself. It points to a reality. The sign on the corner says, “St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church,” but it points to something else. The sign is not the church. We don’t worship or study the Scriptures or pray on the corner. In the same way, this baptismal liturgy points to the reality that God in Christ has invaded this dark world with the eternal power of his life in the Holy Spirit, and that he is imparting himself to new believers in the Holy Spirit all the time.

God is the one who gives us grace to turn around from our ways to his ways. God is the one who gives us faith in Jesus Christ, who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit so we can experience him and love him and live for him. God doesn’t need this baptismal service to bring people to the point of turning their lives around or of trusting in Christ, or being baptized in the Holy Spirit. But it’s a great opportunity for us all to realize that Jesus came to forcibly introduce God’s righteous supernatural power into this world, and that he does it in the person of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians, people who have been “signed over” to Jesus by being baptized into his name.

We don’t usually expect supernatural spiritual phenomena at baptisms along with the photos and the baptismal gowns, but God does. When people turn their lives around and put their faith in Jesus, he expects his people to expect to be filled with the Holy Spirit. What are you expecting today? Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became a believer? Or are you like the Ephesus 12, committed to do your best to live a moral life, but innocent of any experience of the living Christ in your life through the Holy Spirit?

It may be that you have been baptized, but you’ve never made a once-for-all commitment to turn your life around and live for Christ. If you want to do that today, let me suggest that when the parents and godparents answer the

questions they'll be asked on Sam's and Avery's behalf, you answer them for yourself, silently in your heart. You'll be asking God to forgive your sins and telling him you want to live or him. It may be that you have committed your life to Christ, but somehow can't answer Paul's question, "**Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?**" If so, when we pray for Sam and Avery, and ask the Lord, "**Fill them with your Holy and life-giving Spirit,**" you ask Jesus to do that for you, silently in your heart.

He will do it. Expect him to. God honors the prayer of a repentant sinner to turn back to him. He gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Jesus Christ is the same—yesterday, today and forever. He brought Paul and Apollos and the Ephesus 12 to faith in himself and baptized them with his Holy Spirit, and he will do the same for you. If you commit yourself to Christ or are filled with the Holy Spirit today, please jot a note and put it in the offering plate so we can be in touch with you to support you and pray for you and direct you to some helpful resources.

Let us pray.