

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**January 14, 2024**

**Mark 1:4–11, Acts 19:1–7**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Holy God, at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son, as we hear the word this morning, may we recognize Jesus as our Lord and ourselves as your beloved children. Open us to the possibilities and the power of being loved by you, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**Mark 1:4–11**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

## Acts 19:1–7

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues<sup>[b]</sup> and prophesied. <sup>7</sup>There were about twelve men in all.

As I think I have shared with you before, one of my favorite things in the church is the sacrament of baptism. No matter if it is an adult, a child, or an infant. I love the moment of possibility and promise. Where we say explicitly and without reservation that the person being baptized is a beloved child of God, chosen and gifted by God for good works in the world. Baptism is one of two sacraments in the Presbyterian church, the other being communion. A sacrament in the Presbyterian Church is a sign of the presence of Christ and a symbol of God’s action in the world. Sometimes baptism is known as the sacrament that roots us, and communion is the sacrament that feeds us. Baptism is the sacrament that begins the journey. Before Jesus begins his public ministry, he is baptized. As new disciples are added to the community of faith, they are baptized.

There are many dimensions to baptism, a multitude of meanings. If you ask someone what baptism means, you are likely to get different answers. In the Presbyterian Book of Order, in the section that discusses worship, and specifically baptism, it reads:

The Sacrament of Baptism holds a deep reservoir of theological meaning, including: dying and rising with Jesus Christ; pardon, cleansing, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and a sign of the realm of God.

The Reformed tradition understands Baptism to be a sign of God's covenant. The water of Baptism is linked with the waters of creation, the flood, and the exodus. Baptism thus connects us with God's creative purpose, cleansing power, and redemptive promise from generation to generation... Baptism is a sign of God's gracious covenant with the Church. In this new covenant of grace God washes us clean and makes us holy and whole. Baptism also represents God's call to justice and righteousness, rolling down like a mighty stream, and the river of the water of life that flows from God's throne.

Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through Baptism, Jesus Christ calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit gives the Church its identity and commissions the Church for service in the world. Baptism is the bond of unity in Jesus Christ. When we are baptized, we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. In Christ, barriers of race, status, and gender are overcome; we are called to seek reconciliation in the Church and world, in Jesus' name...

Baptism marks the beginning of new life in Christ. The new way of life to which God calls us is one of deep commitment, disciplined discernment, and growth in faith. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, given with and through Baptism, equip and strengthen us for the challenges of Christian faith and life.<sup>i</sup>

A covenant of Grace given by God that signifies dying and rising, cleansing, being gifted by the Holy Spirit, being incorporated into the Body of Christ, calling us to life of service and justice for the reconciliation of the world. This is no small thing.

“Presbyterians emphasize the covenant aspect of baptism. When we baptize infants we emphasize God’s gracious movement toward human beings, connected to us, through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God loved us first. That is what we hold dear. Whether with [an adult] believer or a child, baptism enacts this enveloping love of God — the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, who comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, a love that will not let us go. That is the story of Scripture, and that is the story of baptism, whether an infant in arms or a saint who is finally at rest.”<sup>ii</sup>

Most often in the Presbyterian tradition people are baptized as infants. Though for most of us, it is difficult to remember the actual day of our baptism. Beyond that, I imagine that not many people go around thinking about their baptism or their baptismal identity on a regular basis. The stories in scripture this morning are a good reminder to remember the promises made in our baptism (both the promises by us and by God) and to reclaim those promises and remind ourselves of our identity as a beloved child of God, and to renew afresh our commitment to live from those promises and that identity. It becomes too easy in the day to day of life to not rest in and live out of that identity.

I find it helpful to remember that Jesus' baptism took place in the wilderness and that the heavens are quite literally torn apart as God's Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove and Jesus is declared as God's beloved child. I don't know that I have fully appreciated this but the Greek that is used here, is the same tearing apart that will happen later in the gospel when the temple cloth is ripped in two at Jesus's death. God will rend the heavens apart to get to Jesus to tell him he is beloved. This is not a tame and mild baptism, this is urgent, this is immediate, this is profound. Can you imagine? God is so determined to let Jesus know how much he is loved that nothing will get in the way. He is found in the wilderness and the heavens are torn apart in order for God to declare God's love.

Jesus will go on to be tempted, he will go on to teach, heal, feed, and welcome. He will intrigue some people, he will have people want to be near and follow him, and he will make people so made they seek his death. Through it all, he will know that he is a beloved child of God. That is his, and our, starting point.

It is said that when Martin Luther felt discouraged or afraid, he'd often splash water on himself and declare, "But I am baptized!" John Calvin advised readers depressed by evil to "reflect that they are still on the way" to the "complete victory" that God promises in baptism. Baptism reminds us that whatever may happen, wherever we may go, and whatever we may do or have done to us, God continues and will always love us, accept us, and hold on to us. That is the good news of our baptism.

I also find it helpful to remember that we do not do this life of faith on our own. When we baptize anyone in the Presbyterian church, it is a communal act. The congregation is asked questions and makes promises to help the newly baptized person in their faith. The story from Acts

shows a relationship between people. It demonstrates an ongoing process of learning and mentoring. When Paul arrives in Ephesus, we learn that Apollos has also been there among the community teaching and leading. Paul arrives to disciples who have been nurtured in the faith and he continues the process. Discipleship doesn't happen in just a day, but it is an ongoing process of companionship between different people. It is a continual growing in our understanding and commitment.

Sometimes it can be difficult to be in a community. When you have different people, different gifts, different personalities, different opinions, it can get complicated and even a little messy. But, even with all its messiness, being in community makes for a richer life. It leads to deeper understandings. It fosters stronger growth. The community of faith encourages and supports, challenges and bolsters. Yes, there are times when we are grumpy, and tired. There are times when we have to say, or even hear, a difficult word. But there are also times when we are lifted up. There are times when our joys are made all the more joyous because we celebrate them with others.

There are times when we can't or don't recognize the calling of God, and someone can say, "hey, listen up, that's God talking to you." And there are times when people are able to see and name things about how special we are that we would not otherwise see.

In just a moment, we as a congregation will ordain and install elders and deacons into leadership into this church. These folks, who were claimed in their baptism by God, have now been called out by this congregation. This is a communal calling, a collaborative call between God, the individual, and the congregation. This cannot be done alone. That also is a part of relationships; sometimes it takes more than one to care for, support, encourage, and love another. That will be in abundant clarity in just a short while when we call forward people to be ordained and

installed as Elders and Deacons. Not only do we see that in those that have been selected as leaders, but it is also evidenced by those of you who will come forward to lay hands on the people being ordained and installed. This is one more sign of the baptism we receive.

May we all remember our baptism, and all that it stands for, and be thankful.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Book of Order, W-3.0402

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/0117-wpb/>