

“Receive the Spirit” Baptism of Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr.
A sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey 1/17.2010 Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA)

TEXT: Luke 3:15-17.21-22 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

WHERE DID THE TIME GO?. -Just last week Jesus was a toddler receiving Magi from the East. Apparently, the gospel writers did not consider stories of Jesus’ childhood very important. Actually, they may not have known any of the stories! But now we find a grown-up Jesus, receiving John’s baptism.

"A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That's quite an offer in God's name -- leave your past behind and begin again! Luke’s John is the one who snarls “You brood of vipers! Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

John had just announced that One would come after him to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire--and up steps Jesus. John forthwith administers baptism and lo, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove, and Jesus is both named and claimed:

“You are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.” Beloved , God calls him.

As he begins his ministry, a ministry which will be full of disappointments and challenges, he is given the affirmation that God is with him and God is pleased with him. I am sure it was critical for Jesus to hear this affirmation, loud and clear, just as it is critical for us. It would not take away any temptations, but it gave him purpose and strength to resist.

Baptism is a state of grace. God said, in Isaiah, “Fear not, I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name and you are mine.” Isaiah is speaking to a defeated people. Undoubtedly they were tempted to give up, to move on, find a new God. That is the moment to which Isaiah brings the Word of God: “Mine! Mine! — You are mine!”. Most of us know something about defeat or discouragement. God reminds us: “You are mine .I will protect you, I will redeem you.”

This is God's promise for every living being, baptized or not. Baptism is the church saying to each of us on behalf of God, "You belong to God. You are the image of God." You are part of a family.. God does not love some of us a little more, some a little less; God does not see some of us as more valuable, others as less valuable. God looks into each of us to find a reflecting image, the face of God inside us.

But there is a second part of baptism. John the Baptist ordered: "produce fruit." By the Holy Spirit. Jesus is called into action, called to do God's work in the world. a witness to God's claim upon him. His baptism says, in effect, I belong no longer to myself or to my parents or to my work or even to the world, I belong to God And that belonging demands evidence, work, response.

With or without baptism, we are asked to move our faith, our intimacy with God, out into the world.

Is the Holy Spirit alive in you? Is there evidence of it?

What better Sunday to look for examples of the Spirit working through us than the day we honor Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.? This passionate advocate for justice was completely informed by his baptism, by his understanding of the claim that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ had on him. "I believe in Christianity," he said, "as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." He lived his life in the care of God and driven by the Holy Spirit,

He wrote, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'... Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter ... Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality

He preached, "Prejudice and discrimination distort the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and prevent people from knowing that they are children of God, created in the image of God and unconditionally loved by God. Oppression of others affects all of us, for we are all the Body of Christ and one human family. Oppression affects the soul of the Church."

I was in my first year of college when Dr. King gave his historic "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963. It would be years before I could actually embrace that cry, and began to fully understand about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. Growing up in a conservative republican home in the northeast, all I heard was good republican rhetoric and no exposure to blacks or Jews. White privilege shielded me from learning about Dr. King and the turmoil of that day; but it did not inoculate me from internalized racism. When I was a child, I do not know if my parents and the other adults at Huguenot Memorial Presbyterian Church spoke about Dr. King, or racism or the Civil Rights Movement. They were good people and faithful Presbyterians, and my guess is that their response to Dr. King and the March on Washington was a prevailing silence.

Rev. King, agreed: "I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.'"

Are you that kind of Christian?

In 1963, Dr. King held up for us a dream of a nation and world without prejudice and division, a world that recognizes the dignity and sacred worth of all human beings, a world of justice and peace. The dream and vision of Dr. King reflect the life and teachings of Jesus. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took the receiving of the Holy Spirit seriously, and let it lead him, drive him, sustain him, comfort him.

This is exactly what the baptism of Jesus did for him, and does for us: The Spirit said, Open your heart. Transform the way. Change the world.

What does this mean for us? Well this week it certainly means some combination of prayer and perhaps financial donation toward our Haitians brothers and sisters. And when the time comes, it might mean some heavy lobbying to make sure we open our borders, when possible, to refugees and the displaced. It might also mean further political lobbying to pay more attention to third world countries.

When I went to a prayer site on the Internet, it began "Whether we look and see the stricken faces, or turn our heads aside to avoid the raw face of suffering, we know that Haiti has experienced a huge earthquake, a natural disaster predictable and predicted, a calamity whose devastation might have been mitigated (but wasn't) in times when Haiti was "only" the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

This week it also means taking a strong stand against the embarrassment of Pat Robertson who purports to speak for a Christian majority. Perhaps that means educating ourselves on the truths about Haiti – its strong Protestant presence and Roman Catholic churches, the integrity of its indigenous religions, and the scandal of the world for neglecting this country for so long.

It also means moving out into the world with the timeless values both King and Christ taught us through example -- the values of courage, truth, justice, compassion, dignity, humility and service. We commemorate the universal, unconditional love, forgiveness and nonviolence that empowered his revolutionary spirit. King was man of action, who put his life on the line for freedom and justice every day, who had a global vision of the world house, a world whose people and nations had triumphed over poverty, racism, hatred, war and violence, a vision of ecumenical solidarity, his insistence that all faiths had something meaningful to contribute to building the beloved community.

He was the pre-eminent advocate of nonviolence --- the man who taught by his example that nonviolent action is the most powerful, revolutionary force for social change available to oppressed people in their struggles for liberation.

He said that we all have to decide whether we "will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness.

Fewer and fewer social privileges come with being a church member. That does not mean we should stop making our voice heard; by no means. It does mean that our faith and its expression may sometimes cost us, or at the very least, cause us inconvenience. It does mean that sometimes we may be a lone voice in the wilderness. It does mean that our faith of expression must be intentional, rather than simply following what everyone else is doing.

Can you do that?

“You are God’s child, God’s beloved. Receive the Spirit.