

SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE

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During the last six weeks or so of Advent, Christmas and now Epiphany we have talked about gifts a great deal. We have asked what are you looking for in the manger, what gifts do you bring to the manger and now we turn to what gifts have we been given. Throughout these weeks, we have moved from anticipation of a great gift, to the reception of that gift of the incarnate Christ and the realization that we, by accepting that gift will in turn discover that we become a gift. The gift that we affirm today is the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit within ourselves, given at baptism. This gift of the Spirit is what makes us in turn a gift.

Baptism is one of the two central sacraments of the church along with the Eucharist and we celebrate and experience both today. The focus though is on baptism starting with the baptism of Jesus.

A little history of baptism is necessary. The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance. This ritual cleansing is not something new and unique to John or his community. Ritual baths or mikvahs can be found in the ruins of many ancient synagogues and even in individual homes. With the purity codes as they were it was necessary to have ways to ritually cleanse a person so they could return to the company of their family. There were many ways to become impure so this ritual would be repeated as often as necessary. Even today some people who convert to Judaism will go to a mikvah for a ritual immersion interestingly enough three times to cleanse them of their sins so that they may join a synagogue.

Jesus did not need to be baptized in order to be cleansed of his sin. In fact most Christology holds that Jesus was without sin. So why is the baptism of Jesus as described in the Gospels so important? In fact why did Jesus need to be baptized? The baptism is because this is part of the incarnation and part of Jesus' becoming fully human.

I love the explanation of the necessity of the incarnation in the book *The Shack*. Jesus tells Mack, the main character, that he became fully human to teach us to be fully human. The incarnation did not happen because God didn't understand our condition, but because we do not understand God, our condition or the beauty of the creation that we live in. However if the incarnation serves as a guide to how we can become fully human, then baptism makes sense. Jesus is showing us how to become fully human and baptism is one of those ways in which we attain that. For to be fully human we need an intimate contact with the divine. Jesus leads and teaches not by saying do as I say, but do as I do. By becoming human God, through Jesus, shows us how to act how to live and how to be in communion with God.

What was missing in the baptism of John, what Apollos' followers in our epistle did not understand was the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. This is the element that the baptism of Jesus brings us. The presence of the Holy Spirit given in baptism is that link to the divine. Jesus' baptism in the river changes the idea of baptism forever.

The followers of Apollos tell Paul that they do not know this Spirit he speaks of because they have been baptized with the baptism of John. Without the Spirit, baptism is nothing more than a ritual cleansing. Paul completes the baptism of the men in today's epistle by laying hands on them and giving them the gift of the Spirit. They then prophesy, speak in tongues and are changed forever.

This is why in our service we baptize in the name of the trinity and proclaim the person as a new person, a changed person. They are reborn through the water of baptism. This is why I will anoint the person being baptized today with oil of Chrism, blessed by the bishop. Listen to the words that I will say. "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." (BCP) This is what makes all the difference in the world. This was a radical change for in the time previous to Jesus only a few select people would feel the power of the Spirit. Only a few special chosen ones would be prophets. With our baptism the whole spectrum of spiritual gifts open up to us. God pours his grace out on us in baptism.

This gift though is not without cost. If we are then truly open to the Spirit we are and must be changed. We are not given our spiritual gifts just to leave here today and go home and say, wow, what a great person I am. We are then sent into the world to spread the good news. We are given gifts, but then are expected to use them. We are called to be a gift to the world. How those gifts manifest themselves in each of us is as unique as varied as we are.

Our challenge in these challenging times is to see what our gifts are and ask how is God asking me to step out into this mess of a world and begin to make a difference. We can sit around in despair and fear or we can go out into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit and make a difference. We can be prophets or at least speak and act prophetically.

By being prophets I am not talking about telling the future, but in the ancient sense of a prophet be someone who tells the truth. A prophet is a person who sees injustice and oppression and speaks out, challenges the status quo and takes action. In that sense we are all called to prophetic ministry. I am overwhelmed by what I see in the suffering in the world, but I know that we as a community can make a difference. Even in this time where we are struggling financially as a parish we are called to do more not less. For it is in reaching out in service in God's name, that we will find new strength, new life, new vitality in our life as people of the Spirit, We are blessed with resources that we are just beginning to discover.

Yes we are in a time of wandering in the wilderness, but wildernesses are also places of testing, renewal and growth. Wildernesses are places where we find out the difference between what is essential and important and what is excess baggage. We as a parish are

entering into a time of discernment as we wander in the wilderness of today's world. However we wander in this wilderness with the Spirit as our guide if we only have the willingness to listen and the will to follow where the Spirit is leading.

Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit Come. Fill us with your power. Help us to follow the example of your son and become fully human. Help us to be open to your power so that we may become wholly yours, totally dedicated to bringing your kingdom here in our world. Send your power on us so that we may be a gift to your world, a gift that brings about wholeness and healing in a broken world.