

Welcome

No one likes to miss out on something they're entitled to. One time my mom and step-dad were running late for their flight - have you ever been there? You got out the door late, you hit some traffic, and by the time you get to the terminal, you're running, running, running. They get their tickets, get through security and get to their gate. My parents hadn't had a chance to grab breakfast, but they figured they'd just grab some food in the terminal. Except they were flying out of Kansas City, and the terminals there are small - they weren't set up to have room for food.

So, super stressed and hungry, they sit down in that sort of grumpy state that comes with travelling stress. My mom is a bold person - her favorite phrase growing up (other than STOP fighting with your siblings!) was "Always give them an opportunity to tell you 'No'." So as she and my stepdad sat there in the uncomfortable terminal chairs, stomachs growling, she decided to ask the Captain's Club Lounge for some food.

You know those exclusive lounges most airlines maintain - you have to be an elite member or flying first class to go inside. (For the record, I've never been in one, so I assume it's full of unicorn steaks and endless Dr. Pepper). My mom walked up to the attendant and asked if she could slip in and grab a couple of granola bars. The man asked to see her ticket, and when she showed him, he made a weird face and then told her to help herself to whatever she wanted.

She thanked him, grabbed those granola bars and returned to those uncomfortable seats, their stomachs at least tamed.

It wasn't until they actually boarded the plane that they found out they had been upgraded to first class when they checked in. Whether the ticketing agent didn't tell them or they missed it in their hurried rush, they didn't know. The whole time they were sitting in those uncomfortable terminal chairs, stomachs growling, they could have been enjoying the luxuries of the Captain's Club Lounge.

They missed out on what they were entitled to because they didn't know.

Friends, on this first Sunday of the New Year, I want to talk with you about what we are given as part of God's church. Because too often, we settle for far less than the full gift of God in our lives. Today is going to be about baptism and the Holy Spirit but most of all it's about God and God's love for us. It's about the reality that too often we live in Spiritual Coach when God has upgraded us all to First Class, with all the rights and privileges that go with it.

So let's begin this morning by celebrating the God who has been revealed to the whole world, the God who calls us sons and daughters and gives us immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine!

Message

In the Church calendar, this is the first Sunday of the season of Epiphany. As the season following Christmas, Epiphany celebrates God being revealed not just to a select chosen few, but to the whole

world. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Ask Better Questions" - which I know doesn't make obvious sense out of the theme of Epiphany.

But for the next six weeks, we're going to be reading stories and letters from the New Testament where people are asking questions. Their questions are going to be specifically about how to understand God working in their lives. In other words, what does it mean to say that God is FOR the WHOLE WORLD? And when they're asking those questions, they're really asking, What does it mean to say that God is for ME? What does God mean for MY WORLD?

But *their* world and *our* world are very different. So the questions they ask won't always make a lot of sense on first reading. We'll be looking for the question *under* the question, asking what they're *really* asking to get at the questions that point to the core of what it means to be human, to be created to bear the image of God in the world.

It's going to be a little weird, and a lot of fun.

[Scripture Slide] Today we're going to be in the book of Acts. Turn with me to Acts 19. The book of Acts is the story of the spread of the early Church, from Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem throughout the rest of Israel and then across the Roman Empire and beyond. At this point in Acts, the story is focused on Paul, former persecutor of Christians transformed by an encounter with the resurrected Jesus to the most influential missionary. Paul travels all over the Roman Empire planting Churches. This is the story of when Paul came to Ephesus, which is in modern-day Turkey.

One of the fascinating things about the book of Acts is that it shows us how diverse and crazy the early Church was. Remember: they didn't have email or cell phones. They didn't even have New Testaments. They had word of mouth and what we now call the Old Testament. In chapter 18 of Acts, we meet a man named Apollos, who was a well-educated Jewish man who had heard the good news about Jesus and gone off to teach about him.

But Apollos apparently didn't understand some key aspects of Jesus' ministry. Specifically, he didn't understand that the Holy Spirit, in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, had come to all people.

It's an honest mistake to make, especially for someone like Apollos who knew his bible. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit only occasionally descended onto people, and then only someone very special like Samson or King David. The Spirit wasn't for common, everyday people. The Spirit was ultra-first class.

So Apollos taught about Jesus as the Messiah. And he invited people to be baptized. But he baptized the way John the Baptist, Jesus cousin, had baptized. If you were here during Advent, you'll remember we spent a couple of weeks looking at John. He was the one who prepared the way for God's people by inviting them to receive a baptism of repentance. John's baptism was a ceremonial washing that symbolized a turning away from sin (the root word of 'repent' means 'to turn around'). And, apparently,

this was what Apollos was doing - announcing that Jesus was the Jewish messiah and inviting people to turn from their sins and be baptized to prepare themselves for Jesus' coming.

Let's read what happens when Paul meets some of those people Apollos had preached to:

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions until he reached Ephesus, on the coast, where he found several believers. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" he asked them.

"No," they replied, "we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

"Then what baptism did you experience?" he asked.

And they replied, "The baptism of John."

Paul said, "John's baptism called for repentance from sin. But John himself told the people to believe in the one who would come later, meaning Jesus."

As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. -- Acts 19:1-7

Paul encounters this group of believers -one of Acts' terms for Christians - and asks if they've received the Holy Spirit. But they've never heard of the Holy Spirit, because they've only received John's baptism (from Apollos). Paul explains that John only had half the story (and even John knew that). He challenges them to receive Jesus' baptism, which is distinct from John's.

That question Paul asks, "What baptism did you receive?" is the one I want to focus in on today. Because it's a question that doesn't mean much in today's context.

A quick aside here: our friends in Pentecostal denominations build a lot of theology on this image of Jesus' baptism. They believe that every Christian must exhibit the kinds of behaviors Acts reports - activities like speaking in tongues, being slain in the spirit, faith healings.

I don't want to get into a Church fight, and certainly don't want to throw any shade toward our Pentecostal siblings, so let me just say that, for a number of reasons, we read what's going on in the book of Acts - and what that means for us today - differently.

We read Acts as a *description* of what the early Church did, not a *prescription* for what all churches everywhere should do. We recognize that Acts is a picture of some of the things that happened in the first several decades of the Church. It's not exhaustive, and it's not meant to be a manual for doing Church. It's more inspiration than instruction.

So we shouldn't just ask as Paul did, "What baptism did you receive?" We should ask what Paul was *really* asking - what the question *behind* his question was.

Paul and Apollos were both Jewish. They came from the long tradition of God's people, a tradition in which baptism marked repentance, a turning away from Sin. A tradition that expected God to send a Messiah to rescue God's people.

But when Jesus came, it didn't look at all like anyone expected. When the Messiah came, it turned out he wasn't here to deliver God's people from Rome. He was here to rescue all people everywhere from the Evil of Sin and Death. He came to save the whole world by initiating a new creation movement, one that would restore all people to the image-bearing purpose God originally created us for.

Even John the Baptist didn't totally grasp that. Even *his* baptism looked backward. It was about turning from Sin, about preparing for the Messiah. But *then* what? What happens when the Messiah comes?

For Paul, this is the big difference: now that Jesus has come, he's cracked open the old ways of faithfulness. In Jesus, it's not about blood, not about who you're related to, not about where you were born. In Jesus, it's about trusting God to finish what God started. It's about God reclaiming not just one people, but the whole world. It's about hearing God calling you to life and saying YES.

In other words, John's baptism was just the beginning. Because life in Jesus is about turning away from Sin, but it's also about turning TO God. It's about walking TOWARD the life God calls you to.

We can see all through the book of Acts how hard this was for those first Christians to grasp. Again and again, they were surprised when women and Gentiles and eunuchs received the Spirit. All these people who had formerly been out-of-bounds were suddenly scooped into this new thing God was doing.

Paul meets this group of believers, people who believe Jesus is the Messiah, and he knows that plenty of people get it, but don't *really* get it. So he asks them, Which baptism did you receive?

Was it John's baptism, the one where you turn from your Sin, but you're not really sure what you've turned *to* and you're still waiting?

Or did you receive Jesus' baptism? Did God sweep you up into this world-changing, no-holds-barred rescue mission? Have you received the gift of the Holy Spirit, along with all the power that enables you to be about God's restoration business?

In other words, what Paul's really asking is, "Are you all in?"

Because Faith is about more than just being forgiving for doing some bad things. That's part of it, but that's only the first bit. If you'll permit me to stretch the analogy from the welcome, if your faith is only

about being forgiven, it's like you're sitting back in coach when God has upgraded you to first class for free. You're missing out on everything God has given you.

Sometimes that's because we didn't know. We have plenty of Apollos preachers in the world who are selling a coach faith - one that's just about being forgiven. That's the sort of faith I was raised in. I was baptized when I was 8, and it was all about forgiveness of sin. We called it a 'public profession of an inward commitment'. A marker that I had turned from my sin.

And baptism *is* that. But it's not *just* that. Because Jesus changed what baptism is. He made it a marker of God's family. Like circumcision was for the children of Abraham, now baptism would be for the Church. Only Jewish men could be circumcised. But anyone, everyone can be baptized. It's a marker that we're part of a new family, it's a sign of God's grace in our lives, giving us the power of the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

Baptisms

Appropriately, today we will celebrate the sacrament of Baptism. We have the privilege today of baptizing both a baby and a child.

When to baptize is another issue many churches disagree about. A number of denominations baptize infants, while others insist baptism should be only for those who have made a personal profession of faith.

Our denomination recognizes and celebrates both kinds of baptism. This is because we recognize baptism to be a sacrament (which is a fancy word that means we believe in the act of baptism, we receive a special grace from God). When we baptize, we recognize that God chooses *us*. Baptism isn't something we do, it's something done to us.

It's also a confession that, no matter when we receive baptism, we have a lot of growing to do. I have a deeper, richer, and more full relationship with God today than I did when I was 8. I have chosen again and again - and will continue to choose for the rest of my life - to be in relationship with God.

So too, both Parker and Austin will choose to be in relationship with God. We baptize today as a sign of faith - not mainly our faith in God, but God's faithfulness to us. God has already chosen both of these boys, and God will continue to choose them into eternity. Baptism recognizes this gift and celebrates the grace of God in their lives (and in our lives).

(Instructions to parents)

(Baptism)

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus brings us into God's rescue mission

[During the Examen, leave the Fruit of the Spirit on the screen (no questions)]

The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. -- Galatians 5:22-23

Examen: the fruit of the Spirit are what our lives look like when God lives in us.

1. Which of these fruit have been evident in my life in the last year?
2. Which fruit were not evident in my life last year?
3. Which fruit of the Spirit do I need the Spirit to grow in my life in the next year?
4. How can I make space in my life for the Spirit in this next year?

Assignment/Blessing

What is God calling me to?