Sunday, December 5, 1999
BAPTIZED WITH THE SPIRIT
Isaiah 40:1-5; Mark 1:1-8

When John the baptizer appeared on the scene to announce the coming of the Messiah, he said, “I have baptized you with water, but he (Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” What did it mean then, and what does it mean for us today to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? How does this relate to the person known as Jesus? And what does it have to say to us in this Advent-Christmas season?

First, we need to take a closer look at the word “spirit.” It’s a mysterious word that we use every day in a number of ways. We talk about “school spirit.” At this time of year, we talk about having or getting the “Christmas spirit.” A study of the development of language indicates that people everywhere and in every dialect have used a word like “spirit” whenever they confronted an experience that made all other words seem inadequate. I am told that a word like “spirit” can be found in the vocabulary of every nation and tribe.

The idea of “spirit” has always had religious connotations. The word points to a presence that is assumed to be real but cannot be easily described. It carries within it hints of transcendence or limitlessness and a power that cannot be completely or sometimes even partially controlled by us. Jesus compared God’s Spirit to the wind. “It blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” In the Hebrew language, the word for wind and spirit are the same.

We meet the Spirit of God in the first sentences of the book of Genesis in the creation story. “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God was moving over the waters.” Another translation says, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” And later, when human beings are created, we are told that God “breathed into them the breath of life.” In other words, at birth God gives each human being His spirit.

God’s Spirit, or the Holy Spirit, is intimately connected with the birth stories of Jesus. Matthew’s birth story tells us that the child in Mary’s womb is of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s birth story has the same theme. Mary is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the child she carries will be filled with the Holy Spirit. In the baptism stories of Jesus, we are told that He experienced, in a special way, God’s Spirit as being with Him and a part of Him. He was aware of the power of God’s Spirit within Him.

So it is not surprising that Jesus came to be known and described as a “spirit person.” His earliest followers thought of Him in that way. St. Paul, who wrote the earliest books included in the New Testament, speaks of the good news about Jesus who came “in power and in the Holy Spirit.” He went on to write, “Through this Jesus, God has given this Holy Spirit to you.” He further urged that believers be careful lest they “quench the spirit.” I’ll have more to say about this later.

Like John the Baptist, Paul is telling us that the Spirit present in this Jesus is able to enhance the Spirit of God which is present in each one of us from our birth. There are times when we neglect the Spirit of God that is in us, and it becomes dormant. It is then that the Spirit in Jesus can bring the Spirit in us alive again. To walk with Jesus, to be a follower of the way, helps

rekindle God's Spirit within us. This is partly what John the Baptist was talking about when he said that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit.

And there is more. We are told in Paul's letter to the Galatians that we are to walk by the Spirit, that is, let God's Spirit guide us. And when we do, we are told the fruit of the Spirit, or the results of walking with the Spirit, "will be love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and even faith."

To say that Jesus was a spirit person is also to say that He was a holy man, an individual who lived on that mysterious boundary where the human and the divine intersect. He knew firsthand the experience of the holy. He was vividly in touch with what we call the "world of the spirit," that dimension of reality beyond and within the visible world of our ordinary experience; a dimension charged with power whose ultimate quality is compassion. He lived the divine-human intersection. He was and is the divine-human intersection.

Thus, when John the Baptist promised that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit, he was saying that Jesus was not a holy man or spirit person for His own sake, but so that we might let God's Spirit be active in our lives, and like Jesus, not for our own sake so that we can brag or show off to others how holy and spirit-filled we are, but for service to others.

The Advent and Christmas season is an especially good time to talk about being baptized by God's Spirit because it is at this time of year that many people are freshly aware of God's Spirit. Yet for others, it is a very difficult time because of loved ones who have died, illness that has come unexpectedly, jobs that have been lost, and people who, for many reasons, cannot be with the ones they love the most — and so are especially lonely.

Here then are some suggestions for allowing ourselves to be baptized by the Spirit, for reawakening the Spirit of God within each one of us during this season so that we can help reawaken it in others.

First, remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." A wise and elderly minister friend of mine said to me years ago, "If I had my ministry to live through again, I would strike the note of comfort far more frequently than I have done."

The longer I am in the ministry, the more I appreciate his advice. All people, no matter how comfortable they might seem, have their problems. I keep on hand a supply of little printed cards which say, BE KIND, EVERYONE YOU MEET IS CARRYING A HEAVY BURDEN.

Particularly during the Advent and Christmas season, the note of kindness and comfort needs to be heard. Sometimes during this season of the year what we hear most often from the churches are denunciations of the commercialization of Christmas with the cliché, "Put Christ back into Christmas." There is a danger that with all of our warnings of how to properly celebrate the birth of the Savior, we will crowd out the good news of the season as well. There is a time for "afflicting the comfortable," but maybe not at this season of the year.

In fact, there is a sense in which the commercialization of the season has a good and almost sacramental side to it. We see beautifully decorated homes and buildings. Whole towns take on a festive mood. We hear joyous music, and there is in the atmosphere and in many people (not all by any means) a joyous festive delight, a delight which some of our church services have sometimes lacked.

If we believe that Jesus was born into the world — and He was — He was not born into the church alone, then He is sovereign of all the world, commercialization and all. Perhaps our job as Christians is to proclaim to the world over and over again why this is such a festive and wonderful season. We need to let people know why they are celebrating, and not merely denounce the celebration.

Lest you misunderstand, this is not to say that we in the church are to simply bless all that goes on during this time of year. But it is to say that we need not spend all of the time in solemn denunciation.

“Comfort, comfort my people says your God.” Sometimes I think that if I had one last sermon to preach, one last message to deliver, the text would not be, “Be not deceived, God is not mocked,” or anything of the kind, but rather something like this: “The eternal God is our refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms,” or the words of Jesus, “Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Or other sayings of Jesus such as, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” Or “God so loved the world that God gave the Son,” or “Everything works together for good for those who love God,” or today’s words from Isaiah, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”

I don’t say these things to be sentimental. There are undoubtedly people who accept the consolations of the Christian faith without ever facing the challenge, the call, the inconvenience, the sacrifice. I mentioned a few weeks ago that there are too many people on what I choose to call “church welfare.”

The word “comfortable” is used too much and misused in our everyday conversation. Someone will say, “I’m comfortable with that,” meaning, “I can put up with that, or I can agree with that in a kind of lukewarm way.” Such a statement implies that the individual is not very excited about the idea or very much opposed but comfortable.

That’s not the kind of comfort the prophet Isaiah or Jesus was describing. The comfort of God’s Spirit being reawakened in you, the comfort of the Christian faith is a strong, bracing, reinforcing comfort. It is the comfort, the good news of knowing that we are trusted and cared for by God. It is the comfort of being baptized with God’s Spirit. It is like the gift of a job to a person who has been out of work for years. It is like the clasp of a friend’s hand in a time of need.

The comfort we are talking about here means to strengthen, to aid, to encourage, to refresh, to relieve, to help in distress. Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the “Comforter,” and in so doing, He is giving a promise that God will stand by a person in the time of his or her need.

The second suggestion for being freshly aware of God’s Spirit in you, or what John the Baptist called being aware that you have been baptized by God’s Spirit, especially during this season, is to avoid quenching the spirit. I mentioned earlier in this sermon the advice of St. Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances ... Do not quench the Spirit.” When we are not thankful and are therefore unhappy people, we quench the Spirit, that is, we block God’s Spirit from working in us and we also become spirit quenchers for others.

One of the classic spirit quenchers that comes to life each year at this time is Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ story, A Christmas Carol.

Another spirit quencher at any time of year is the continual fault finder. It is the easiest of all pastimes and one of the most deadly.

Jesus was above all a spirit uplifter, which is another way of saying that He baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. Yet He was constantly having to deal with spirit quenchers. Here's one example. When He was a guest in a friend's home and an unnamed woman anointed Him with a jar of very expensive perfume, He was deeply moved by her spontaneous act of devotion. But there were spirit quenchers present. They criticized her gift. They were angry and said, "Why this waste? This ointment could've been sold for a large sum and the money given to the poor."

Jesus, however, accepted her gift and devotion with a gracious manner. He did not in any way quench her generous spirit but affirmed it. In addition to receiving a gift, Jesus also gave a gift in return. It was the gift of letting her give to Him. This is a gift we usually don't think very much about. It can be one of the most important gifts we ever give, and it is always spiritually uplifting.

I'm going to end this sermon with a few other random suggestions of how the coming of Jesus, which we celebrate at this time of year, can baptize us with God's Spirit.

You are being baptized with God's Spirit when you accept the fact that things do not have to be perfect to be good. Life does not have to be without flaws or mistakes to be meaningful and beautiful. There are so many margins of mercy built into this existence of ours.

You have been baptized with God's Spirit when your confidence is in God's presence and in God's future instead of your own past.

You are experiencing the baptism of God's Spirit when you are convinced that you can repossess your life because God is always giving your life back to you as a brand new gift no matter how you may have lost it, fouled it up, wounded it, misused it, or failed it.

You are being baptized with God's Spirit when you realize that you are free to fail because you know it's not the end of the world when you do. Amen.