

Armed and Dangerous

Acts 19:1-7

As this is the Sunday in the church year when we remember the baptism of Jesus, I'd like to start this morning with a reading about the ordinance of Baptism, taken from the Church of the Brethren website:

Brethren have a long tradition of “gathering around the Word.” Taking the New Testament as our guide, we discuss what Jesus did—and why. Then we try to pattern our own lives after his...

Before making any serious commitment—to marry, to accept a responsible office, to practice healthier living—a person considers the meaning and consequences of that choice. Often, he or she undergoes a public ceremony to acknowledge the momentous personal decision. For Brethren, the ordinance of “believers baptism” marks just such a deliberate, thoughtful commitment.

Choosing to follow the example of Jesus begins with repenting, or humbly re-examining one's relationship with God. Jesus himself showed us the way: He asked to be baptized by John, and he instructed his disciples to baptize others who wanted to be symbolically “reborn” through God's grace, into a new life of mature belief and service.

Three hundred years ago, the first Brethren chose adult baptism as their ceremonial response to God's saving act—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today, in the presence of the congregation, a newly committed person... publicly acknowledges his or her decision, and is immersed three times forward, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Through this symbolic cleansing and rebirth, the person becomes a full member of the Brethren congregation and of the larger body of Christ. The decision to be baptized indicates a willingness to take on both the joy and the *responsibility* of living Jesus' teachings.

The early Brethren mentioned before were members of what is known as the Radical Reformation. Many years earlier, a Catholic priest, Martin Luther, kicked off the original Reformation when he nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, condemning the excesses and corruption he saw in the Catholic church. In time others felt that Luther's Reformation had not gone far enough in returning the church to what they read about in the Bible. These people became known as Anabaptists, or re-baptizers, for their belief in adult baptism. It is in this group of re-baptizers that Brethren find themselves. The Anabaptists ran into a great deal of trouble as the State churches of the day required infant baptism as a mark of citizenship. To be re-

baptized was considered unlawful. The early Anabaptists experienced much persecution because of their beliefs about adult baptism.

We might question why re-baptism would be a problem, especially in light of today's Scripture. In our story today, we find Paul encountering 12 disciples of Christ who have not yet heard of the Holy Spirit.

The commentaries I consulted all agreed that these people were likely Jews who had been baptized by John the Baptist at some time and then traveled to Ephesus. There they may have heard Apollos preach the Jesus they were told to expect when they were baptized by John. Keep in mind that while John did baptize for repentance, and he pointed people toward Jesus, he did not baptize in the name of Jesus. Only Jesus' disciples would do that as they were commanded by Jesus prior to his ascension, and well after John the Baptist had been killed.

As Paul encounters these disciples there is something that piques his curiosity, and he asks if they have received the Holy Spirit. Their response is that they have never heard about the Holy Spirit, despite being disciples of Christ. Once Paul explained the need to be baptized in the name of Christ, all enthusiastically agreed to be re-baptized. Upon their new baptism, these disciples were able to speak in tongues and to speak words of prophecy, all gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This story points out a few things about baptism. Baptism can be offered as a form of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. When

offered in the name of Jesus it will also result in receiving what some commentators call “the greater gifts”, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues and the ability to speak words of prophecy. It doesn’t matter under which church banner one is baptized, if you have been baptized in the name of Jesus, you have been blessed with the greater gifts of the Spirit.

Unfortunately, there are many professing Christians today who, like the disciples in Ephesus, might say they have not heard that there is a Holy Spirit. Why? Perhaps because we lack a full understanding of what baptism means.

While we understand that baptism is our official entry into the Christian community, how many of us are truly aware of the power bestowed on us at our baptism? We are comfortable with the idea of having our sins forgiven, but there is more! We have received what commentator Ruthanna B. Hooke calls “the astonishing, world-transforming, *dangerous* power of the Holy Spirit.” She continues, “With the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism, each new believer is drawn into the eschatological event of the pouring out of the Spirit, and thus becomes a prophet.”

I had chosen the title of Armed and Dangerous for this message before the events of earlier this week. While armed and dangerous people

attempted to disrupt our government, I am speaking of a different kind of arms and danger.

As Spirit-filled Christians we are armed, as mentioned before, with the dangerous power of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit allows us to proclaim what God is doing in the here and now and to do so boldly. We see this in the social justice movements that are growing around the world today. The Spirit gives us the ability to “speak truth to power”, calling out the inequity and injustices that have become institutionalized in society. We do this with the revolutionary message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are emboldened to speak because we trust that the Holy Spirit will give us the words that others need to hear. It inspires each of us to move outside of our comfort zones, trusting that with God nothing will be impossible for us to accomplish in His name.

The same Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism, is the same Spirit that was present at Pentecost allowing people from around the world to hear the Gospel in their own language, and is the same Holy Spirit that the 12 disciples in Ephesus received when Paul laid hands on them. This ancient Holy Spirit, that has guided God’s people for millennia, is the same Spirit each of us received at our baptism.

With the knowledge that we, too, have been granted the “greater gifts” of the Spirit, that we are armed with the dangerous message of the Gospel, dangerous to the dark forces of this world. Let us envision how

we can use these gifts to further God's kingdom here on earth, to bring His light to every dark recess where animosity, injustice, and evil lurk. As the events of this past week have shown us, there is much work to be done and with the power of the Holy Spirit within us, we are invited to find our place and purpose in God's kingdom work. May His will be done!

Lord, we live in a world torn apart by people who are armed and dangerous. Yet, we are aware that we, too, are armed and dangerous in a very different way. You have armed us with your Spirit to defeat the powers of darkness that inhabit this world. Help us to walk in Your strength, to speak Your words of truth, and to fulfill the prayer that Jesus taught us that "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We ask this in Jesus name. AMEN

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