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1/13/2013, The Baptism of Our Lord  
Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-22  
Baptism and the Holy Spirit

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me read our Second Lesson again. It is short and it is puzzling because it seems to speak of a baptism that does not include the gift of the Holy Spirit:

<sup>14</sup>Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup>who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; <sup>16</sup>for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup>Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-17, RSV)

Our story this morning follows a horrible event: I mean the martyrdom of St. Stephen. One of the lookers-on at the stoning of Stephen was a future saint and apostle of the church: St. Paul. But at this early stage, Paul is not an apostle of the church, but rather a fierce persecutor of it. His name back then was Saul. Our Acts Chapter 8 begins with the following note about Saul and his consent to the stoning of Stephen and then of the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem:

<sup>1</sup>Saul approved of the killing. That day a bitter persecution started against the church in Jerusalem, and everyone except the apostles scattered to the country districts of Judaea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup>There were some devout people, however, who buried Stephen and made great mourning for him. <sup>3</sup>Saul then began doing great harm to the church; he went from house to house arresting both men and women and sending them to prison. (Acts 8:1-3, NJB)

## THE HELLENISTS

As it turned out, this persecution of the early church aimed at a special target: Jewish Christians called the “Hellenists.” The apostles, Peter, James, and John and the rest were not Hellenist Jews, but rather Hebrew Jews, and so they seem not to have been persecuted.

You might recall the Hellenists from the story of the deacons in the early church. The Hellenists were...

Jews from outside Palestine; in Jerusalem they had their own synagogues where the Bible was read in Greek. The Hebrews were native Palestinian Jews; their language was Aramaic but in their synagogues the Bible was read in Hebrew. This distinction made its way into the early Church. Missionary initiative was to come from the hellenistic group.<sup>1</sup>

One of the Hellenists was the deacon Philip—a name that sounds good in my ears because it is also the name of my brother, Philip, down in Maryland. This Philip – the deacon - left Jerusalem at the time of Saul’s persecution. He left the city, yes, but he did not leave his ministry to Jesus. Rather, he traveled to Samaria and preached about Jesus to the Samaritans.

Now, the Jews and the Samaritans did not much like each other. From the Jewish point of view, the Samaritans were blood-kin, but kin who had gone spiritually wrong. From the Jewish point of view, the land of Samaria was a kind of no-where land, lying between the Jewish regions of Galilee and Judea. The Samaritans were not pagans compared to the Jews, but rather more along the lines of heretics. They shared the same Bible as the Jews except that it was diminished, omitting both the Psalms and the Prophets.<sup>2</sup> That is quite an omission. Can you imagine a Bible without the Psalms and Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest?

Furthermore, the Samaritans did not worship in Jerusalem, but had set up their own temple on Mt. Gerizim.

It was extraordinary, then, for St. Philip to undertake missionary work to the Samaritans. He was preaching where many self-respecting Jews did not want to go. I guess it would be like a bishop telling some young pastor that he must go preach to the Ku Klux Klan or some other group that rather causes you to shudder.

But Philip does his work faithfully and many Samaritans come to faith in Jesus. Philip then baptizes them.

Now we come to the strange part—the part about the Holy Spirit. When the apostles back in Jerusalem hear about the Samaritans coming to faith in Jesus, they send two of their apostolic company to investigate. There is some lovely irony in the two they chose: Peter and John. I say “lovely irony” because one of

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote on Acts 6:1 in the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Krodel, *Acts*. Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament. (Augsburg Publishing House: Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1986), page 161.

those two – John – had earlier lived up to his name “son of thunder” by offering to bid fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village:

<sup>52</sup>And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him; <sup>53</sup>but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup>And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” <sup>55</sup>But he turned and rebuked them. <sup>56</sup>And they went on to another village. (Luke 9:52-56, RSV)

Now this same John again bids fire come down on the Samaritans, only this time it is the fire of the Holy Spirit.

## **NOT MEANT TO CRITICIZE PHILIP’S BAPTISM**

At first glance, it would seem that the apostles, Peter and John, are able to do something Philip cannot do. Philip has baptized, but he has not given the Holy Spirit. But the overall flow of the story suggests that something else is afoot. The story does not want to say that Philip’s preaching was somehow defective, nor that there can be no gift of the Spirit without the laying on of hands, nor that it takes an apostle to baptize, nor that baptism in the name of Jesus alone is insufficient. After all, the first Christian Pentecost, in the upper room with the tongues of fire in Acts 2, was in the name of the Lord Jesus. In fact that is the standard description of Baptism throughout the book of Acts: baptism is in the name of the Lord Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, that first Pentecost, with the tongues of fire and the gift of the Holy Spirit, did not involve the laying of hands. Furthermore, apostleship is not the issue, for Ananias who healed St. Paul of his blindness and through whom Paul received the Holy Spirit, was not an apostle, nor a deacon, but simply a disciple<sup>4</sup>

So, the point of this story is not to put down the baptism of Philip but to officially involve the apostles in the ministry to the Samaritans. There are not two churches—one for the Jews and one for the Samaritans—but one church. The point of this story seems to be that the apostles witness that the Samaritans

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<sup>3</sup> For example, “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 2:38, RSV). Or Paul preaching in Ephesus: “On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 19:5, RSV)

<sup>4</sup> Acts 9:10-19, RSV

receive the same Holy Spirit that they themselves have received. The Church is one. It is large-hearted and gladly accepts all kinds of folks.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT

By focusing on this rather obscure story of the Samaritans and their baptism, I have been aiming toward a discussion of the Holy Spirit -- of that great gift that you and I share with those ancient Samaritans. They received the Holy Spirit. It took a while, involving both the ministry of Philip and the apostles Peter and John, but eventually they received the Holy Spirit. And in this, you and I are like them, for if we have been baptized, then we should believe that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us too. The Baptism liturgy says so, and we should take it to heart: the Holy Spirit of God has been entrusted to you and me.

But what does this mean? What is the gift of the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in his Baptism, as we read in this morning's Gospel. It came upon the one-hundred-and-twenty gathered in the upper room on that first Pentecost. It came upon the Samaritans in today's story. And we believe it came upon you and me when we were baptized.

But, again, what is this gift? If we have it, many of us seem unable to manifest this gift in all the ways the early Christians did, for few of us speak in tongues or perform miracles of healing. Still, we should believe that we have this gift and we should cherish it.

What is this gift? As it turns out, the gift of the Holy Spirit is *power*—power in the heart, power in the soul. It is power waiting to be enjoyed. It is not so much a newfound ability in us, but rather a newfound freedom given to us owing to a change in our circumstances. When we were baptized, life changed, for God himself declared to be on our side. He officially inducted us into his ministry of saving the world. We are now his children, and so we are free to pour out our lives seeking the good, knowing that in the end, we cannot fail.

A beautiful expression of that freedom can be found in this morning's great reading from Isaiah 43. It is the gift of knowing that you will survive even the worst of things this world can lay upon us:

<sup>1</sup>But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.  
<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your

God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3, RSV)

It makes quite a difference in life to know that you will make it—that none of your efforts toward the good will be in vain. Having the Holy Spirit is not like having silver or gold or even the strength of Samson. Rather it is having the *power* that comes when you are sure that you can go right ahead and strive for the good with all your might, and it will prove worth it in the end.

Profound wonders of old, then, shall be true for us too! The Three Young Men in the book of Daniel, for example, were thrown into the burning fiery furnace, yet no harm came to them. They had been true to our God, regardless of the threat of the burning, fiery furnace. And as a kind of visible symbol for all the baptized, the fire of the Holy Spirit preserved them through the fire of the furnace:

<sup>26</sup>Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come forth, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. <sup>27</sup>And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their mantles were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.

If we are baptized, then, we can afford to surrender some pursuit of fashion, for example. It will not kill us. And we can afford to exchange some luxury for some more charity. We will survive it. And we can surrender the satisfaction of a sharp retort to a colleague, in favor of kindness and a desire to help that colleague.

Jonah of old might have been a reluctant prophet, but he was a prophet nonetheless. The very Spirit of God had been given to him. So, again, as a kind of visual symbol to all the baptized, small-hearted Jonah was thrown into the midst of a raging sea and landed in a tummy of a whale, but that sea and that sea monster delivered their passenger safe to the other side.

And if *you* are baptized, then you are among those who can labor with all your might in this tough world knowing that you too will land safe and sound on that better shore, even heaven itself, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.