

“When the Spirit Says Move”

Acts 2:42-47; Mark 1:4-12



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What a great pair of Scriptures – the birth of the church of Jesus Christ at Pentecost and the baptism of Jesus. And how ‘bout John the Baptizer, who got to dunk his cousin in the Jordan River? My Baptist friends call him John the Immerser. And what about the clothes John wore? Camel hair with a leather belt and a diet of locust and wild honey. John says he’s unworthy to untie the thong of the sandals of the one who was coming. And how ‘about Jesus himself. When he was baptized by John we’re told that “just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. So the dove has become a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Then the voice of God said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark: 1:11)

But the dove is not the only symbol of the Spirit. Earlier John said to the people, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” And if

you jump over to Acts 2 you find another fire and the Holy Spirit brought together again at Pentecost. “When the day of Pentecost had come...suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And tongues as of fire appeared among the people and rested on each of them. And all were filled with the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 2:1-4).

Fire, too, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Early one morning an electrical fire began in a church building and within a matter of minutes the entire building went up in flames. The pastor, many of the members, and some neighbors stood by watching helplessly as the fire fighters tried to control the fire and assess the damage. The pastor saw someone he thought he knew and said to him, “Is that you, John? I haven’t seen you at church in a long, long time; what brings you out on a night like this?” John said, “Well, Pastor, this is the first time I’ve really seen this church on fire!”

Violent wind, turbulent water, and fire are all very powerful forces. Maybe that’s why Mark tells us that after Jesus was baptized the Spirit immediately *drove* Jesus out into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.” (Mark 1:12-13). It almost sounds like some kind of action-adventure movie.

One of the things these symbols say to me is that when we decided to let the Spirit guide us, we’re in for some unexpected experiences. Look, for example, what happened to Peter. On Pentecost the Spirit inspired him to preach a powerful sermon. Quoting from the Prophet Joel he said, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out (there’s another active verb!) my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young people shall see visions, and your old people shall dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17). How did the people respond? Luke tells us, “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said... ‘what should we do?’”

Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him...So

those who welcomed his message were baptized.” (Acts 2: 2: 37-41).

The first thing Peter said to do was the same thing Jesus did: be baptized. Why baptism? The water represented God’s mark on his life. It was sort of like an invisible tattoo. Have you ever used that lotion that can only be seen in the dark? In the dark you just glow. It’s like God can recognize your glow from the day you were baptized.

At St. Andrew’s we talk about Eight Stepping Stones for Spiritual Growth. Baptism is the first step in our journey with Christ. It’s not something we do in the privacy of our home or our bedroom—just me and God. We go public; we come out of the closet and say to the world, “I am a follower of Jesus.” It’s the same step Jesus took when he was baptized. Then he took other steps. He went to the synagogue in his home town and went public. He said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21)

Lyndsi, Shea, and Emma are here this morning to take an important step in faith. We call it confirmation, which means to confirm the promises that were made in our baptism. Emma will be taking that step today. Lyndsi and Shea took it nearly a dozen years ago when their parents stood up here, held them in their arms, and promised to show them the love of God and raise them to know Jesus Christ. I doubt whether Shea and Lyndsi remember much about that day; they were simply too young. But you don’t have to remember; we remember for them. We were all witnesses. Even more important, we promised to guide and support their parents and to be their spiritual family.

Their baptism was their personal Pentecost—the day of their spiritual birth. We give a candle to every child who is baptized as a symbol of this and we ask them re-light it on the anniversary of their baptism and tell them the story of how this child was marked and claimed by God.

A Baptist minister in a west Texas town once gave a sermon that he ended with the question, “How many of you

here are down-to-earth, born-again Baptists?” Every hand went up except one, a young woman who turned out to be Presbyterian. The pastor walked up to her and said, “Honey, don’t you realize that unless you are born again and immersed in the waters of baptism, you won’t be saved?” The young woman stood firm and said, “My great-grandparents were Presbyterian.” Clearly annoyed the Baptist preacher said, “That is a very poor argument. What would you be if your grandparents and parents had been idiots?” She was confused for a moment and said, “Baptist?”

Emma, Shea, and Lyndsi are here, in large part, because you were born into a family who wanted you here this morning. Whether you knew it or not, whether you had any say in the matter or not, that family has been looking out for you for the past dozen or so years, sometimes shadowing your every move. When you would have run right out into the street, they were there to grab your hand and gently bring you back to safety. More than that, they were looking out for you in other ways. They put you in school and made sure that you learned how to read and study. They began taking you to church so you could learn about the love God has for you and the purpose God has for your life; so that you could know you have someone who will be your friend and companion for your entire life and give you a spiritual family to support and guide you.

But today you take the step of confirmation. And in doing so you says two important things: First, “This faith in God that I have seen in others, I now chose for myself.” And second, whether you realize it or not, you are saying, “I am no longer a child. I am now a young adult. And from here on out, I expect others to be pull back more and more so that I can learn to stand on my own.”

There’s another step I hope you will notice in Luke’s description of what people were doing in the early church. He writes, “They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

These early Christians kept studying and growing and serving and hanging around together. They took their relationships with God and with one another seriously. They wanted to get to know the object of their faith and so they didn’t begrudge time spent in study, worship and prayer. I

wish I could invite each adult here this morning to drop in the Head 2 Heart class Sunday mornings at 9:00 a.m. A couple of years ago, the naysayers among us said we could never get middle school kids out of bed that early and drag them to church. But week after week they are here. In fact, they are the ones who say to their mom or dad, “Let’s get going; I’ve got to be a church this morning.” It’s wonderful to see them connecting with God and with one another. Believe it or not, one of the things they enjoy most is Bible study. You see, we have a huge problem in the church today; it’s a puzzle really. We value higher education but we are largely illiterate when it comes to our own sacred book.

In a recent survey by the Barna Research Group, there were some interesting revelations about the level of Biblical knowledge professing Christians have. For example, only 61% know that Jonah is actually a book in the Bible—not just a story. 30% weren’t able to give the correct answer to the question of where Jesus was born. 24% of the people surveyed either thought the book of Isaiah was either in the New Testament or didn’t even hazard a guess as to where it could be found. Such statistics should come as no surprise to us. After all, how is it possible for people to know the contents of a book that they have not read?

Not that we don’t have a Bible or two lying around somewhere in our homes. 93% of Americans said they own at least one Bible, but a full 70% said they read it only infrequently, and 23% of Christians said that they do not read the Bible at all. That’s quite a contrast compared with the early church, where “they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” How many of you know the books of the Bible? Our Three Musketeers have nailed them—as you will see in just a moment. Hopefully they will inspire you to do the same.

But faith is a whole lot more than learning Bible facts. It’s about discovering a God who is real and who is there for us at every moment of our journey through life. It’s something we want to offer to every person in this neighborhood—something to hold onto, a spiritual anchor. People are looking for direction, meaning and a purpose—and that’s what faith gives us. We were each created for a purpose. It doesn’t take long to realize that popularity and wealth can’t bring us

real satisfaction, nor can they provide us with the answers to life’s most perplexing questions. Only God can do that.

Statistics show that people anchored in faith are more content. Marriages that have a strong spiritual foundation are stronger and more resilient; children raised in homes where there is a solid spiritual center are more likely to resist drugs, and that crime and self-destructive acts decrease as meaningful church involvement increases.

Luke goes on to give us a snap shot of what was happening in the lives of the followers of Jesus: “All who believed were together and had all things in common... Day by day, as they spent much time together..., they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good-will of all the people.” (Acts 2:44-47a) The early Christians spent a lot of time together in fellowship—just eating and talking—because they had a hunger for believing and belonging.

Luke says, all who believed were “together” —they knew faith was meant to be lived out in a community; that there were no “Lone Ranger” Christians. When real fellowship happens we share our joys, our burdens, our hopes and fears, our hurts and heartaches with God and with one another. And in doing so we find help, support, healing, and direction from above. *That* is fellowship. The middle school students in the Head2Heart class and the high school students in the Salt Company all meet in little “family” groups of between four and six youth and one or two adults. They share their “highs” and “lows” with each other and pray for one another.

Emma, Shea, and Lyndsi, you are on the front end of what we hope will be a long, wonderful adventure that is your life. You’ve heard Jason and I say it before, but I’ll say it again: Your confirmation is just the beginning of your spiritual journey with Christ and His Church. He needs you to stay connected to him and to a community of faith wherever you may be. For now, we are delighted that it’s St. Andrew’s. We look forward to seeing you put to use the gifts and talents, minds, hearts, and wills, that God has given you.

And now it our privilege, first to welcome Emma into the family of Christ as she receives the sacrament of baptism. And then to be able to hear directly from each of our confirmands as they share their statements of faith with us.