**Preaching Notes**

**Baptism of the Lord.B.2014**

**Genesis 1:1–5**

The service of baptism in the United Methodist Church is intentional about connecting the many and varied ways in which water symbolizes our new birth in Jesus Christ in the ritual for Christian Baptism. Not surprisingly, the first event our blessing over the water in our ritual for baptism recalls is the story of God’s creation of the world: “Eternal Father, when nothing existed but chaos, you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light” (Baptismal Covenant I, *The United Methodist Book of Worship*).

This passage suggests that God’s very being and presence is at work in the created world. As such, to take care of the earth and all that is upon it is to take care of God. We humans have a significant responsibility in caring for God’s creation, for later in Genesis it tells us that humans are to have dominion over all of the creatures of the earth and its plant life. As persons who have been baptized into a covenantal relationship with our Creator through Jesus Christ our Lord, we have a special responsibility. We are the body of Christ, and we are commissioned to do the special work of reconciliation, of loving God by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The beginning of the New Year is an excellent time to raise awareness about caring for God’s creation and to take inventory as to how the church is carrying out its mission in this area of ministry.

* Has your congregation engaged in any assessments about its carbon footprint?
* Is your church intentional about making environmentally responsible purchases when possible, insuring the efficiency of its building, and committing to a program of reuse, repurpose, or recycle?
* How does the call to care for God’s creation extend to loving and caring for God’s people?

**Acts 19:1–7**

The Book of Acts mentions the Holy Spirit perhaps more than any other book in the Bible. But before we get to Acts, let us first examine what the Old Testament has to say about the Spirit. After all, the Holy Spirit does not make an appearance only after Jesus appears on the scene. God’s Spirit has always been a part of our story of faith.

There are basically three major emphases we can identify that are associated with the work of the Spirit in the Old Testament. The first is the Holy Spirit as an agent in creation. This is an almost completely impersonal representation of the Spirit, by which the awesome power of God is said to have swept across the earth, leaving creation behind in its path.

“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 a wind of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” And so goes the reading from Genesis for today. The word “wind” —translated into English here from the Hebrew word *ruakh*, which means air, or wind, or breath—later gets translated as “Spirit.” So the Spirit is, in the beginning, associated with the creation of all things good upon this earth.

The Old Testament also portrays the Holy Spirit as a source of inspiration and power. In these instances, the Holy Spirit becomes a vehicle of God’s revelation and activity. Israel’s leaders—from Moses to Joshua, Judges, David and Solomon, all the way down to the “Servant of God” Isaiah, are all said to have received their wisdom, courage, and power as gifts resulting from the possession of God’s Spirit. We see this Spirit at work especially in the prophets, who are said to have been possessed by God’s Spirit to such a degree that all that they say and do is attributed to being the words and work of God. It is as if they are completely taken over by God’s Spirit, so that their whole bodies and minds and beings become vehicles for God’s Word to be spoken to human beings.

Last in the Old Testament is the idea of the Holy Spirit as God’s presence in the community of God’s people. The Spirit is associated with the hope of Israel and God’s plan for them in the unfolding of their history. So we can see that the Holy Spirit was a significant part of our understanding of God even before Jesus came to live upon this earth.

Things get more complicated when we get to the New Testament. Some of the Old Testament sense of the Holy Spirit continues, particularly the idea that the Spirit gives power to human beings. In Jesus we see the culmination of this concept. It is the Spirit of God that endows Jesus with power as the Messiah, and it is the Spirit of God that empowers the church for its mission in the world.

But the very close relationship of Jesus to God begins to change and transform the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit as Christians begin to associate the Holy Spirit with not just God, but particularly with God in Christ Jesus the Lord. So, for Christians, the Holy Spirit comes to represent both the presence and activity of God and the continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world. This idea really comes to fullest expression in the Gospel of John, who describes the Holy Spirit as the “Counselor” who represents both divine presence and ongoing guidance for the disciples.

In the Book of Acts, we see the development of a close connection among four elements: the proclamation of the Gospel, baptism, the laying on of hands, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. And of course, that’s what today’s scripture lesson talks about, in which Paul starts to draw a distinction between the kind of baptism practiced by John the Baptist, who proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and baptism in the Lord Jesus Christ, which has to do with the laying on of hands and the coming of the Holy Spirit to those who believe in him and follow him.

In some churches, especially churches in the charismatic or Pentecostal tradition, before a person can be recognized as a believer and follower of Jesus Christ he or she must show clear evidence of having been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Witnesses look for signs that this has happened. Those signs usually include things like having an ecstatic experience such as being slain in the Spirit (falling on the floor and convulsing) or speaking in tongues, dancing, or experiencing a miraculous physical healing.

United Methodists have a somewhat less dramatic, but equally important, understanding of what it means to be baptized in the Holy Spirit of Christ Jesus.

United Methodists don’t believe that there must certain kinds of evidence of the Holy Spirit, such as ecstatic experiences or speaking in tongues. Our Book of Discipline clearly states: “It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the primitive church, to have public prayer in the church, or to minister the Sacraments, in a tongue not understood by the people” (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012,* paragraph 104, Section 3—Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules, Article XV). This means, on one level, simply that our prayers and our songs must be in a language that everyone can understand. But included in this statement is the idea that praying in a completely unknown tongue is not a practice of United Methodists.

United Methodists focus their understanding of the Holy Spirit primarily on grace. By grace, we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit.

Methodists believe that the grace of God is with us even before we know it. Wesley called this “prevenient grace.” We are born with this grace. It is in us while we are still being knitted together in the womb. As we grow and learn more about Jesus Christ we become more and more filled with this grace—this undeserved, unmerited, loving action of God—until at some point in our lives, maybe when we are young, or maybe when we are a little older, we come to this incredible realization that God’s love really is for us. God loves us even though we sin. God loves us even though we make lots of mistakes and hurt each other and hurt ourselves. God still loves us, just as we are, no matter what. John Wesley called this experience “justifying grace,” and he characterized it as a feeling of deep and abiding assurance.

When we come to that realization, it really changes the way we feel about ourselves. In response, we start to work harder and harder on knowing Jesus Christ, by praying and studying God’s Holy Word. Through these disciplines we start to feel his presence in our lives, and we see his face in the faces of people who show us his grace.

This is what is known as “sanctifying grace” in the United Methodist tradition. And this process of justification and new birth is sometimes referred to as a conversion experience, or being saved, or entering into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is the point in which we start to have a faith of our own.

There are lots of ways that Christians talk about this experience. No single way of describing it is the only right way. What counts is that we begin to feel God’s love for us in a very personal and intimate way, and that feeling changes the way that we feel about ourselves and about our value and place in the world.

For Christians, this feeling, this sense of knowing God’s love and seeing the Spirit of Christ in other people, this overwhelming feeling of love being poured out on us, being loved and accepted for who we are, this *assurance,* is the work of the Holy Spirit. It isn’t a body or a form or a shape. It is a breath, a wind, a knowing, a *feeling* that rushes through us and draws us to others. It fills us with an assurance that there is something underneath it all, something beyond what we can know from science or from intellectual pursuit or from thinking.

The Holy Spirit is that which gives us faith. It is the grace and love of God creating, sustaining, growing, healing, renewing, and empowering human beings to have faith and to love one another and take care of God’s creation. It is the wind that swept over the dark and formless void and gave it life. It is the breath of God that enters each one of us, giving meaning and shape to our dark and formless lives. It is the voice that spoke the word of God through the prophets. It is the hope that gave the nation of Israel the strength to leave Egypt and head out to the promised land. It is the Word of God that came to dwell in Jesus Christ and lives among us. It is the tongues of fire and the mighty rush of wind that fell upon the followers of Christ gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. It is the force that enabled them to understand each other even though many different languages were being spoken. It is the power of God’s grace that lives in and through the followers of Jesus Christ. It is our hope, our center, the very ground of our being, into which we were baptized into the faith through the laying on of hands in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is the Spirit of Christ, the light which has come into the world, and which the darkness can never put out.

**Mark 1:4–11**

In the Gospel of Mark it says that the thing that most distinguished Jesus Christ from everybody else was that Jesus lived, breathed, and was moved by the Holy Spirit. In Mark’s account, before Jesus had even appeared on the scene, when John the Baptist was still busy preaching to people to repent of their sins and be baptized, and people had come from far and wide to listen to John preach, confess their sins, and be baptized, John was very clear about telling them, “I only baptize you with water, but one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Then, when Jesus arrives to be baptized by John, as Jesus is coming up out of the water he opens his eyes and sees the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit coming down on him like a dove.

None of us can even imagine what that scene looked like. None of us has ever seen the heavens open up. None of us has ever seen the Holy Spirit. But then, none of us is Jesus.

But I believe I can state with 100 percent certainty that even though none of us has ever seen the Holy Spirit, for every single one of us the Holy Spirit is very, very real.

Methodists believe so strongly in the Holy Spirit that we use it as part of the symbol for our denomination. The cross stands for Jesus and the flame stands for the Holy Spirit. But if our logo had already been taken by some other group, we could have just as well have chosen for our symbol a cross and a dove.

What is the Holy Spirit? It is the Spirit that moved the prophets of old when they spoke for God. It is the Spirit that was embodied in the entire life of Jesus Christ, who brought God’s love out of heaven and down to earth in a historical breakthrough.

* Where have you seen the Holy Spirit breaking into this world?
* What has made you believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit?
* When have you experienced a baptism by the Holy Spirit? How would you describe that experience? How did it change you?