

Title: Here Comes the Spirit

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, today we remember the baptism of your son and the gift that baptism gives us, the Holy Spirit; empower and renew us to do your work in the world where love replaces hate, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sarah Jo Sarchet once pastored at a Presbyterian church in Chicago. She told this story in a sermon.

A 10-year-old boy in her congregation named Cameron, walked into her office and said he needed to talk to her. Fresh from soccer practice, and wearing his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, he had a request for her. "I'd like to be baptized," he said. "We were learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School. The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized too."

Using her best pastoral care tone of voice, she said, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized because everyone else is?" His freckles winked up at her and he replied, "No. I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God."

She was touched by his understanding. "Well, then," she said, "How about this Sunday?" His smile turned to concern and he asked, "Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can't I just have a friend baptize me in the river?" She asked where he came up with that idea. "Well, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in a river, wasn't he?"

Caught off guard, she conceded, "You have a point. But, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?" Realizing this was a teachable moment, she climbed up on her foot stool to reach for her Presbyterian Book of Order that was located on the highest shelf. But before she placed her hand on the book, he responded.

"I guess by my new way of living," he said.

She nearly fell off the foot stool and left the Book of Order on the shelf. Cameron's understanding was neither childish nor simple. It was profound. Baptism calls us to a new way of living.

People who went out to John the Baptist seeking to turn their lives around. That is what repentance means, literally. So, all these people are going to John and somehow Jesus gets wind of this and goes to be baptized as well.

Not one gospel writer can begin to tell the story of Jesus' ministry without first mentioning John the Baptist. Mark says little about John, while the other gospel writers elaborate.

John was doing a typical Jewish ritual cleansing to wash away sins. Normally, this was done in Jerusalem, but John was a rebel. John also had no authorization to do this, which made him unpopular with the religious authorities. The authorities left him alone, because John was very popular with the people.

The Christian Church began in a world where John the Baptist was better known than Jesus and where John had more followers. Each gospel writer takes pains to say that John told people to follow someone who will come after John who is much more significant than John. I believe the reason for this situation was that John baptized across the Jordan Valley from the Judean hills, whereas Jesus' ministry was principally in Galilee. There were far more people in the Judean hills than in the Galilee and Jerusalem was far more important than Galilee.

When Paul found disciples in Ephesus and discovered that they were baptized with John's baptism, Paul had to explain to them that John was baptizing for repentance and for laying the foundation for Jesus. They had to be baptized again to get the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the reason for the gospel writers to even give John the Baptist any mention is that Jesus gets baptized. Now who does the baptizing varies depending on which gospel writer you read. The reason for this is because Jesus getting baptized was hard to explain. It posed theological problems. In spite of the difficulty, it must have happened because Matthew, Luke, and John try to skirt around it. Mark just says John baptized Jesus.

Why is this a problem? If Jesus is the Son of God and was without sin, why was Jesus baptized for a forgiveness of sins? Mark either does not see or understand the problem or doesn't see it as significant. Mark may also be mainly interested in telling the story as it happened rather than introduce explanations and apologies.

Mark describes the entire population of Judea going to John to be baptized. I'll bet the temple priests took a pass. It is unlikely that everyone went to John, but it must have been a significant number. Even then, there must have been a spiritual crisis or a spiritual emptiness that prompted so many people to travel across a wilderness to see John. They seemed to think that John was the one to cleanse them from their sins, rather than the religious authorities.

It is in the wilderness that there is an expectation of a divine encounter. The people may have been feeling this. John was expecting it and telling people that it was coming.

Now John wasn't exactly a striking figure. He wore camel's hair. It must have itched something terrible. He held it together with a leather belt, an extravagance as he didn't resort to rope. John's diet was locusts and wild honey. Actually, there was little else to eat there. I wouldn't want to talk to him face to face.

Elijah wore camel's hair held together with a leather belt. John was wearing a prophet's uniform. In Matthew, Jesus calls John the Baptist, Elijah. However, in John's gospel, John the Baptist denies being Elijah. Luke says John will have the spirit of Elijah.

Why are even mentioning Elijah? Elijah was one of the very few in the Bible who did not die. A chariot of fire swooped down, picked Elijah up, and the whole lot went up into the heavens. It was tradition that Elijah would return to herald the coming of the messiah. At every Passover meal, an empty chair and place setting is for Elijah. Like Elijah, John the Baptist called the people to turn to God.

In addition to his baptizing, John did some proclaiming. It seems to me that John must have said many things, impressing people so much that they traveled to see him. The gospel writers only record a little and Mark the least. For the gospel writers, John the Baptist's primary role is to announce

one who is more powerful than John and to whom John is unworthy to be with.

In fact, John downplays his work of baptism. John merely baptizes with water. The one coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John announces that Jesus' primary mission is giving people the Holy Spirit.

Now Jesus arrives on the scene. He is there to be baptized. There is no fuss or muss from John. John just does it. The other gospel writers are left to try to figure out the theology.

What happens next varies from gospel to gospel. In Mark, it is Jesus who sees the heavens torn open and the Holy Spirit descends on him. No one else sees it. The event of Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit is Jesus' secret. Mark is unique that as we read Mark, there is a messianic secret. This secret begins at Jesus' baptism. Jesus refuses to reveal his identity. It is only revealed at the end by a gentile soldier.

The gospel writers like the dove metaphor for the Holy Spirit. A dove became a popular symbol of the Holy Spirit. But we need to remember that it is a symbol and not what it would have looked like. A dove can dive fast through the air.

In order to give people the Holy Spirit, Jesus must have the Holy Spirit. This is when that happens. Without the Holy Spirit, Jesus cannot begin his ministry.

Then there is the voice. Mark is not explicit, but presumably only Jesus hears the voice. The voice speaks directly to Jesus. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11b) The voice will repeat this statement on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus receives confirmation of who he is and what he must do.

The implication here is that if Jesus could not begin his ministry without the Holy Spirit, then how much credit does the Holy Spirit get when we are engaged in ministry? The Holy Spirit engages the world through the church. The baptized are the church. Without us, the Holy Spirit does not act in the world. Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot engage the world. I mean we can, but it would be a poor job without the Holy Spirit.

We sometimes do a poor job of it anyway, but we represent God in the world. That is an awesome responsibility. We are sometimes criticized for being hypocrites. We're not perfect, but we aspire to be better. We gather here to be renewed for a week's worth of ministry. Empowered by Christ's body and blood, we leave here to re-engage the world.

Text: **Mark 1:7–11** (NRSV)

⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with^f water; but he will baptize you with^g the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;^h with you I am well pleased.” ¹

^f Or *in*#

^g Or *in*

^h Or *my beloved Son*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mk 1:7–11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.