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## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, January 10, 2010

**Never the Same: When the Word Changes You**

***Simply Baptized***

Acts 8:14-17

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Some years ago the “town fathers” of Providence, Rhode Island were desperate to find a way to revitalize the city’s downtown, especially its dangerous waterfront. So what did they do? They hired an artist. The artist chosen was a multi-media artist named Barnaby Evans, who was known for combining science and art and nature and the senses to generate something special.<sup>1</sup>

The “something special” in this case took the form of a sculpture, a sculpture installed on the three rivers of the capital city of Rhode Island. This one sculpture has 100 component parts. Each part is a giant metal basket into which firetenders place wood and light the firewood. These sparkling bonfires have attracted millions of people to Waterplace Park. Anyone who has ever walked the river during WaterFire will never forget the experience of how “opposites attract.”

In other words, here’s a city that set fire to its water, creating a crowd-pleasing, family-friendly WaterFire Festival. One-hundred “fire-pits” kindle a roaring, but carefully contained fire in the middle of the water. People flock to water-fire and watch the flames from the shore. It didn’t take the construction of fancy shopping centers or giant skyscrapers or a big urban sports stadium or a bells and whistles amusement park to bring people back downtown. All it took was the unquenchable artistic combination of two symbols: fire and water.

Why is it that what city planners could see so clearly has been firmly forgotten by twenty first century Christians? Water and fire, that powerful, awe-inspiring combination of opposites, is the birth-right of all Christians.

Before Jesus even started his public ministry, John prophesied and promised that there was one coming who would baptize with “the Holy Spirit and with fire.” This was what made Jesus unique: his baptism was a WaterFire baptism; to follow him was to live a WaterFire life.

And so our text connects fire with water; following Pentecost, the Spirit continued to fall upon the early

believers with the story of the anointing of Peter and John. The Holy Spirit knits individuals and churches together. There is unity in the early church as the Holy Spirit moved throughout the body. The early believers prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit. At water baptism, the early believers were endued with the Spirit of adoption; but at the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit endued believers with fire, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The visible presence of the Spirit established the authority of the gospel and testified that the Spirit would be the governor and director of the faithful.

So what happened since the time of Jesus and the early church? There have been periodic revivals like Azusa Street and Amy Simple McPherson? Why has the Holy Spirit become such a sore point instead of a power source for the church? Maybe too many Christians over-indulged on one particular gift of the Spirit. The Spirit isn't just a one gift giver. The Spirit is the power source that flows through the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit was what made it possible for the Body of Christ to draw breath; to be an animated, living force in the world. Spirituality for a Christian is not the living out of the human spirit; spirituality for a Christian is the living out of the divine Spirit in our personal and communal life. John Calvin writes, "The Scripture testifies that we put on Christ at baptism and that we are ingrafted into his body; that our old man may be crucified and we renewed into righteousness. The laying on of hands demonstrates that God is the only giver of grace and distributes the same according to his good pleasure."<sup>2</sup>

So why is a "Spirit-filled life" or a WaterFire baptism, such a foreign concept among Christians today?

The other day, I "tweeted" an off-the-cuff comment that included a word I had just made up, but everyone "got it." Here is the tweet: "What went wrong? The church cooked up programatology and made its leaders programmatologists, when we should have learned pneumatology."

This just-created word, "programatology" was instantly deciphered and understood. The ancient word taken from the Christian tradition, "pneumatology," the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, caused readers to run for their dictionaries. Pneumatology means the study of the Holy Spirit.

Many immediately figured out that "programatology" was a dependence and reliance upon the tools and techniques of planned-out programs. But people had trouble recognizing the presence of their birthright, "pneumatology"; a life steeped and soaked in the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.waterfire.org>

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981), 340.

Water and Fire is our baptismal birthright. Fire and Water is what brings divine power and presence to every member of Christ's body.

Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, new converts were just wet believers who had confessed "the Lord Jesus." It took the faithful hands of fellowship, extended from Jerusalem and from those first called by Jesus to be his disciples, to bring the gift of the Holy Spirit to these newly faithful ones. Long ostracized and the ultimate outsiders, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit and immediately felt the wholeness that made them full members of Christ's living Body.

The life of faith is not to live out of some program. The life of faith is to live out of God's Spirit.

Programatology puts its faith and its future in the hands of plans and programs. But what happens when the programs can't unfold according to plan? What happened to plans to remodel the "Windows on the World" restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center? What happened to the planned events at the Super Dome in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit? What happened to your own plans for retirement, a new car or a college education when the stock market plummeted? In the past 18 months, the average household in the US has lost 25% of its net worth. This is a huge hit on every family here; every person here. Anyone plan for that? Does anyone have a program for that?

Now consider what happened to first-century Christians. As he ascended, Jesus Christ didn't leave his disciples a "plan." Instead he promised them the Holy Spirit and provided them with a new identity: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."<sup>3</sup> Note how Jesus inserted that word "Samaria" in there and punctuated it; as if we his disciples might skip over the outcast and the outsider.

Baptism is our entrance into the Covenantal promise. As infants, baptism is the sign and seal of God's covenantal promise. When we baptize infants, we are claiming the promise of God that he has chosen a people; his people will be regenerated unto a profession of faith. As adults, we profess faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and baptism is the sign and seal of that profession. When adults are baptized, we become brothers and sisters of Jesus and become heirs to God's Kingdom through baptism. John the Baptist was a fiery preacher, a preacher of righteousness and repentance. But at Jesus' baptism, something somewhat tender and touching happened. When Jesus was baptized, Luke tells us, "heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a

dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” Jesus was baptized and his Father told him how proud he was of him. It’s good when any parent says, “I’m proud of you,” to a child.

Every child needs to hear that message from a parent. The Father was giving his personal blessing to Jesus’ mission in the world. But here is what should be most heartening to us: God was also granting God’s blessing to all who have been baptized. We read in I John 3 these words, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Baptism tells us who we are. We are children of God. At our baptism there was an unheard voice from heaven saying, “This is my son, this is my daughter, whom I love.” Henri Nouwen writes, “You are my beloved and on you my favor rests’ is what God says to each human being. We have an identity and a birthright given to us by the one who created and loves us. This blessing and essential birthright is hard to hear above all the other voices of our lives, the voices that shout, ‘You are no good, you are worthless, you are ugly, nobody cares about you.’”<sup>4</sup> Somebody does care about us. God cares.

Only WaterFire could have made this first-century transformation possible. Only WaterFire could have made Jesus’ dozen dense disciples into the apostolic beachhead of a mission to the whole world.

Fire and wind is Luke’s best description of the Holy Spirit when it descended upon the disciples. There is no stopping an oxygenated flame; it burns high and hot.

But Christians aren’t just firebrands. We are tempered with the safe and secure fluid of water; the water of our baptism “in Jesus’ name.” And our baptismal waters give us a person, not just a purpose or a plan, to follow.

This morning’s text is challenging us to live not out of our own power alone, but out of the power of the Spirit of life (Romans 8:1), the power of the Spirit of truth (John 16:13), the power of the Spirit of fellowship (2 Corinthians 13:13), or most summarily, the power of the Spirit of Christ (Philippians 1:19).

Don’t go it alone in life. Go with God, the God whose hand turns everything dross and gross into gold. The Scandinavian (skaldic) term for gold is “fire in the water.” There are five expectations for being a vital member of

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<sup>3</sup>Acts 1:8

<sup>4</sup>Henri Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal* (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1992).

the body of Christ at Eastminster. First, know God. Share your faith so that others come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; bring people in. Second, grow in God. Nurture your faith through regular and ongoing education on Sunday morning, Wednesday night or in a small group; build people up. Third, connect in God. Have fellowship with other believers for prayer and support through a small group or congregational events; connect people with other believers. Fourth, serve God. Serve others in the name of Jesus through short term or long term missions, teaching Sunday school, being a youth advisor, answering the phones at church, being a greeter or usher Sunday morning, cooking with the kitchen fellowship and the opportunities go on and on; send people out. And fifth, glorify God. Glorify God regularly on Sundays; pick the service of your choice and be consistent; focus people on God in worship.

Christianity is not something we do; being Christian is not something we fit into our lives when it is convenient. Our lives have been radically changed, because of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit through the electing choice of the Father. Let's live that WaterFire life this week. Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. Let us pray.

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E A S T M I N S T E R P R E S B Y T E R I A N C H U R C H

1958 N. Webb Road • Wichita, Kansas 67206-3404 • p 316.634.0337 f 316.634.1496 • [www.eastminster.org](http://www.eastminster.org)