

Sermon
Second Sunday of Advent
St. Andrew's, Methuen
December 6, 2020
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Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Marks opens: "The beginning of the Good News...."

We all know how important beginnings are: the beginning of the school year, the beginning of a new job or the beginning of a marriage: We know that if our beginning is in the wrong direction, it will cost us time, effort, and suffering.

It's hard to raise our GPA after beginning the school year with bad grades. It's hard to get promoted at work when we miss our first staff meeting and fail in our first project.

If we want to make a new beginning, John the Baptizer says, we must practice repentance—the Greek word is *metanoia*, to change our minds—by confessing we've headed in the wrong direction and want to make a new beginning.

Some people never give us the chance: some teachers think we will never make good grades; some bosses think we will always be a slacker.

Fortunately, the God of Jesus is not like that: our God loves to give us chances for new beginnings. Therefore, people flock to John's baptism for the forgiveness of their sins and a fresh start.

We've all experienced heading in the wrong direction, so we too need what John is offering. We know that to take this step we must acknowledge we've messed up and promise to do better in the future.

Alcoholics Anonymous understands this in its 12 Steps of Recovery:

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

John's message of repentance is the beginning of the good news: the first step on the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City, the Realm of God.

Unfortunately, too many of us traditional Episcopalians think we have reached the pinnacle of the Christian life once we've received forgiveness of our sins. We've gotten all cleaned up and then stopped dead in our tracks.

These are exactly like the folks Paul runs into in that great scene in Acts 19:

You remember Paul wanders into Ephesus and finds some believers to worship with—but after only a few minutes it becomes clear to Paul that something is bad wrong. This worship is dead, so he asks them, **“When you became believers did you receive the Holy Spirit?”**

And they say, “Holy Spirit, never heard of it, what’s that?”

He asks, “How were you baptized? And they replied, “With John’s baptism.”

Paul says, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance; but he insisted the people should believe in the one who was to come after him—namely Jesus.”

Paul is telling them exactly what the Gospel of Mark is telling us today: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, and then John says: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.... I have baptized you with water; **but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**”

The word “baptize” is an ordinary Greek word that means “to immerse.” At All Saints’, Chelmsford, on our kick-off Sunday in the fall we’d have a parish picnic and the kids would make tie-dyed T-shirts, which would have to be baptized in dyes of various colors.

John’s baptism is an immersion in water to experience the forgiveness of God.

Jesus’s baptism is an immersion in the Spirit to experience communion with God.

Once Paul tells them about Jesus, we read, “They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and the moment Paul had laid hands on them the Holy Spirit came down on them and they began to speak with tongues and to prophesy.”

Now they could have a proper church service!

And let’s be clear—in the New Testament Spirit immersion isn’t just a one-time event, like some think of confirmation, an event which many promptly forget once the service is over.

No! Life in the Spirit is a daily journey into the heart of God and the heart of our True Self.

There is never an end to the new stages of growth and states of consciousness because the Spirit is infinite. **We will never get to the bottom of our communion with God.**

AA also recognizes this reality in Step 11, which says, "Sought through prayer and **meditation to improve our conscious contact with God**, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."

So here is a question: This Advent how is God calling me to further my journey in the life of the Spirit—the Spirit beyond me, the Spirit beside me, the Spirit inside me?

Now I've been in the Episcopal Church my whole life, so I know this kind of talk makes some people real nervous. Reminds me of the story of a man in the back of an Episcopal Church in the middle of the service who starts yelling, "Halleluiah, Halleluiah"! An usher rushes over to quiet him, but the man says, "You don't understand, I've got religion." And the usher says, "Well, this is certainly not the place to get it."

There are two problems with this kind of resistance: one is that the New Testament is full of people having just these sorts of visible experiences of the Spirit.

But second, those who resist **this** kind of experience, often also shut down **any** experience of the Spirit.

It's like what happens to our emotions: shut down one, we shut down them all. Deny your anger, and you'll lose your joy.

My view is that all of us have been immersed in Spirit and that we are having spiritual experiences throughout our day, though we may be asleep to them.

The first time I held my first grandchild was an experience of Spirit. Every time we're touched by the beauty of a flower or a sunset, we're having an experience of Spirit. Every time we quietly read our Bible, we're having an experience of Spirit. Even worshipping on Zoom can be an experience of Spirit.

Of course, we can go through life and ignore all these experiences, which is why Paul warns us in 1 Thessalonians: **"Do not quench the Spirit"**.

Do not quench the Spirit in your worship or in your life.

And there is no **one** way to experience or express the Spirit:

So as our Advent journey continues, we invite the Spirit to lead us more deeply into **the experience of repentance** and **the experience of Spirit**, as She guides us more deeply into the love of Christ.