

The meme read, "I'd like to cancel my subscription to 2021. I've experienced the free 7-day trial, and I'm not interested." In all seriousness, I'm sure there are many of us that may feel this way. I know I have. I've had a mix of strong emotions this week. As are many, I am still reeling from the images of the national Capitol on Wednesday afternoon, Christian symbols and scripture mixed in with unnecessary loss of life- a gross violation of the law and blatant racism- white supremacy- and idolatry and a clear lack of leadership. It was a sad day in our country. It was a reminder that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue (Rear Adm. Rev. Margaret Grun Kibben, House Chaplain). Unfortunately, canceling Wednesday let alone 2021 is not our reality nor is it within our ability to control any more than canceling 2020 was. It is ugly and uncomfortable, and we're left to face it (even if we don't do politics) as followers of Jesus and hopefully to learn from it; to grow from it; to act on it; and to change because of it. And yet, despair creeps in, anxiety and fear take over, anger builds, compassion fades away and grief resides. We forget who and whose we are. We forget that we are God's beloved, as are those with whom we disagree and want to "unfriend." Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It is a time when we remember Jesus' baptism and our own, if we have been baptized. I cannot think of a better way to navigate this new year and her challenges than to remember our baptisms and the promises we made or our parents made on our behalf until we were able to make them for ourselves. Today's scripture comes from the Book of Acts. At the time when Acts was written Christianity has not fully come into being yet. It was still really new. And just like any one who is or becomes a Christian, there was then and is always room now to learn and grow in your faith, in relationship with Christ and in knowledge of scripture. Our faith and

understanding are always evolving. I remember disappointing many people because they assumed that I should know everything about the Bible because I was a preacher's kid. Even now as I pastor, I don't pretend to know all the answers because I don't. However, because of the Holy Spirit at work, I learn something new every time I encounter God's word. After all, faith IS a journey. Where we pick up today in Acts we find Paul in the town of Ephesus, where there is already an established church. He stumbles across a group of disciples who learn something new about Jesus' baptism and the Holy Spirit. Let's hear what God's Spirit may be saying to the church. But first, let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in the Book of Acts, 19:1-7. **READ.**

We don't know how Paul came into contact with this group of disciples- on the road, at the church, at a social event. They didn't have cell phones or social media, so it had to be in person. Nor are we told how far they were into getting to know one another before Paul began quizzing them about their baptism. Nor do we know with what tone Paul asks them these questions. How did he even know they were disciples? Were they wearing a cross or speaking Christianese or had a certain glow about them?! We don't know; however, I'd like to imagine that Paul was kind and compassionate in his approach. I'm intrigued by how these disciples, influenced by John the Baptist, respond to this stranger asking them these questions. "Hey! Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you came to believe?" They don't say "That's none of your business!" or "Who wants to know?" or "How did you know we were baptized?" They answer honestly and vulnerably. "We've never even heard of the Holy Spirit." Nobody had taught them that baptism was connected to God's powerful Spirit nor that it had to do with

following Jesus. So Paul asks, “Well, into what were you baptized?” They answered, “John’s baptism,” the baptism of forgiveness and repentance. It doesn’t sound as if Paul called them out, which can often make people feel embarrassed or stupid and completely shut down or get defensive. “He did not object to their answer nor does he reprimand them” (Brueggemann, Collection of Sermons, Vol. 2). **Instead of calling them out, he calls them in.** Professor Loretta Ross at Smith College believes that calling people out in our culture has taken conversations that could have once been learning opportunities and turned them into mud wrestling on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, message boards, etc. “The antidote to that outrage cycle, Professor Ross believes, is ‘calling in.’ Calling in is like calling out, but done privately and with respect. ‘It’s a call out done with love,’ she said. That may mean simply sending someone a private message, or even ringing them on the telephone (!) to discuss the matter, or simply taking a breath before commenting, screen-shotting or demanding one “do better” without explaining how. Calling out assumes the worst. Calling in involves conversation, compassion and context. It doesn’t mean a person should ignore harm, slight or damage, but nor should she, he or they exaggerate it” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19>).

Paul knows that forgiveness and repentance are a part of baptism. Nevertheless, these disciples had not heard about the work of the Holy Spirit nor seemed to understand about the risen Christ. And Paul called them in as he began explaining to them about the surprise of baptism in the name of Jesus that pushes beyond forgiveness and repentance. Paul wanted these church members to be amazed and empowered by the gifts given through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He believed

that the baptism of Jesus- where the Holy Spirit descends from heaven like a dove- is the true mark of the church. Baptism is one of two sacraments we observe in the Protestant church- communion being the other. It is a visible sign of an invisible grace of what God has already done in Christ through the Holy Spirit. **It is not our act for God. It is God's act for us.** In baptism, God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, calls us by name, claiming and marking us as Christ's own. Baptism proclaims the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ, in whom the love of God has been poured out for all people...a love that overcomes our sin, washes away our shame, and conquers death. By water and the Spirit we are made sisters and brothers in Christ, members of the body of Christ- called to participate in the work of Christ in the world.

There are three questions I ask in a baptism. 1) Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? 2) Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? 3) With God's help, will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? If we were to stop and really absorb and process these questions, it's a lot to take in these promises we make. What do these questions look like lived out in your life? How do others know that you follow Christ? By your words and/or your actions?! By your humility and openness to receive the power of the Holy Spirit at work in your life?

These disciples humbly received what Paul had to say. **They were willing to listen.** Maybe they listened because Paul calls them in instead of calling them out for what they didn't know or understand?! After listening, they were baptized in

the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul then laid hands on them, and as happened with Jesus, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they were taken up into the new reality where God's life in the world was committed to them. They were gifted by the Spirit with speaking in other languages and prophesying- which is bold speech. "That is, they experienced the world in a wholly different way that is beyond all of their usual categories and all of their usual capacity to control" (Brueggemann).

Our daily lives, whether under attack or just another run of the mill day, are not separate from God's love nor involvement in them. We're a hurting and broken people in desperate need of healing, reconciliation and justice, and we worship a God who never forsakes us and through whom all things are possible. It may not look or feel that way right now and this may be the challenge of your life to ponder the depths of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. BUT the Spirit of God IS at work in the church and in the world, driving us out beyond our control to think new thoughts, to speak boldly to injustice, to love our enemies and to serve others...to be the helpers in this world- all manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit. The reason we do these Christ-like things is by the power of the Holy Spirit. We could never do them on our own. "By God's Spirit we're made to be a new people stirring things for good in the world" (Brueggemann).

Like the disciples from Ephesus, we must be willing to be humble and to listen and receive instruction as well as gifts from the Holy Spirit. We must be willing, like Paul, to call people in instead of calling them out. Some students asked Professor Ross, "What if calling out in fact is the most effective way to seek progress — as with, say, in the case of a public figure? And when is politely trying to 'call in'

simply no longer effective? She responded, 'You can't be responsible for someone else's inability to grow.' So take comfort in the fact that you offered a new perspective of information and you did so with love and respect, and then you walk away'" (*New York Times*).

Wednesday was also the day of Epiphany- the revealing of the Christ child- Emmanuel- the light of the world. Love has come and love alone will endure. The story of God's faithful love continues in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the breach was taking place in the Capitol, through the anger and sadness, the bravery and servitude, Rear Admiral Margaret Grun Kribben, House Chaplain on her third day on the job, calmly and boldly prayed that "in the chaos, the Spirit would descend in the room to offer us peace and order. That we would look to care for each other, even as we are under stress" (religionnews.com).

Who are we revealing to the world in how we live our lives? Whose light are we bearing? What baptism did you receive? Faith...it's all that easy and it's all that hard. As a people of Christian faith, we've got work to do, friends. Let us trust the work of the Holy Spirit to give us the needed words to guide our hearts, mouths and fingers (texting) in order to overcome evil with good- to bear Christ's light in a desperate world and to manifest the fruit of the Spirit. Remember your baptism and whose and who you are...God's beloved. And if you aren't baptized and would like to be, give me a call...send me an email...be in touch. You, too, are God's beloved. Amen.