

“CHRIST IN YOU, THE HOPE OF GLORY”

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany, the Baptism of Our Lord, January 7, 2018

Text: Acts 19:1-7

To understand just how good the Good News is, sometimes we need to contemplate the alternative. We need to ask what it would be like to be “children of a lesser god.”

Once, when Paul was crisscrossing the Near East with the gospel of Jesus Christ, he came upon a group of people in Ephesus who called themselves disciples, which is to say followers. But followers of what or whom? John the Baptist. They loved his teachings. They had received “his” baptism.

Paul had a little talk with them. “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” (Which raises the possibility that already in the first century, in what is now Turkey, there was a congregation of Lutherans?)

When Paul asked whether they had received the Holy Spirit, he was not asking if they had received an optional extra, but the essential gift of Christian faith. Back when John told people at the Jordan about Jesus, he had said that Jesus was more powerful than he was, more important than he was, and that Jesus “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” This is what Jesus gives us: the Holy Spirit.

When the disciples of Jesus faced the prospect of losing him, before he was crucified in Jerusalem, they feared that they were losing, along with their friend, all the gifts he supplied them with. The peace, the joy, the comfort, the hope—all that would disappear. But he promised to be with them. Not in physical form, but by giving them his own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to be with them forever.

The Holy Spirit is not an additional app which you can install on your Christian smartphone: it is the phone itself.

So Paul wanted the Ephesian Christians not to lose out on the gift that Jesus was and is, which I will sum up for today’s purposes in a phrase Paul uses elsewhere: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

When you have the Holy Spirit, you have Christ in you—the hope of glory. Let me define that by telling you what the opposite is. The opposite of “hope of glory” is “fear of disaster.”

To be a disciple of John the Baptist is to possess whatever John offered; to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to possess the Spirit of Christ. That is why it took Paul only a few minutes to persuade the disciples of John the Baptist to receive baptism into the Lord Jesus Christ.

What difference would that make? It alters how God factors into your life.

Why did people go to John the Baptist? They were fleeing from the wrath to come! Remember?

Matthew 3:5-8 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Every one of them was fleeing from the wrath to come. Nobody went to John for good news. He didn’t have any. He traded in bad news. “You are a sinner. Repent. And stop doing what you were doing.

Don't just say you're sorry, act sorry." The good news of John was that Jesus was coming, with a better gift. With Jesus, the forgiveness of sins was not a catch-and-release affair. You were not just put back in to try to improve yourself. You were given the Spirit of Christ.

Imagine what it was like to belong to the congregation in Ephesus where the essence of each sermon was "Repent, you awful people.". Those "disciples" must have remained afraid, very afraid not only for themselves but for their neighborhood and city.

But then Paul came along, and explained how the warning message of John had found an answer in the peace of Jesus Christ, who brought healing and hope. If I had been with them, I would have seized the opportunity to become disciples of Jesus, to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit alters how God factors into your life. I would not deny that God was a factor in the lives of John's disciples. But the way God affected them was through his law, by his demands, and ultimately by being full of wrath.

But God is a factor for Christians in a different way, operating within us to guide and empower us and give us peace amid all strife and difficulty. Christ is in us—and that makes us hopeful. We are not here fleeing the wrath that is to come! On the contrary, we know that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul tries to explain how this works for Christians:

Romans 5:3-6 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.)

A Sermon by Rev. Marcus Felde, Ph.D., pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, Indiana

Every morning we wake up with a rough idea of two things: what we have to do, and what we have. Our challenges and obligations, on the one hand; and the resources to meet and accomplish them, on the other. We compare them. If the obligations and challenges outweigh the resources, if we can't see how we can meet the demands, we worry. Whereas, if we realize our resources exceed our obligations, it puts a smile on our face.

What happened when the disciples of John became disciples of Jesus, is that God went from being the one who was always piling on more and more obligations and demands, to being the one who supplies our need and empowers us for what is ahead of us. God went from being threat to being promise, from demand to resource.

Think of the Holy Spirit's function this way: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." You need have no fear of disaster, when Christ in you is your hope of the opposite-of-disaster.

Another way to picture the Spirit's function in you, the gift of Christ, is to think of Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd [translation: God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ is invisibly and eternally in me], so I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

he leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff —

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

*my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

Before they received this gift from Jesus, the disciples of Ephesus thought more along these lines:

The Lord is my boss, I shall not slacken up. He makes me stand at attention, he gives me all sorts of things to do, he heightens my anxiety. He shows me how to do things right. Even when I walk through pleasant pastures I am jumpy, for there is always the possibility of slipping up. My salary is never quite enough. . . . Surely he will track me all the days of my life, and as long as he is around I will never know peace.

Jesus denounced the leaders of Israel who “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” He was not like that himself. He does not give us things to do we cannot do, nor does he make us suffer what he himself could not suffer or more than we can bear. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit in us: “Christ in us: the hope of glory.” This is what is like, to be children of the greatest God there is.

Amen.

