



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**Dangerous Territory**  
A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

January 11, 2009  
*Baptism of the Lord Sunday (Year B)*  
Acts 19:1-7

Now Christmas is over. With this Sunday we describe as “Baptism of the Lord Sunday,” we enter into a new season in the church year: the season of Ordinary Time. This title can be misleading, as you might imagine because we are tempted to say the word *ordinary* with some distaste. *Ordinary* can feel boring, while things that are a little different, themed or extraordinary tend to hold our attention and generate energy. Yet, ordinary doesn’t actually mean ‘average’ or ‘regular’ – but rather comes from a word that means *counted*. In other words, the season between today and the first Sunday in Lent is *Counted* or *Numbered Time* – and is devoted to lifting up the mysteries of Christ in all areas of life. And I think we can all agree that the mysteries of Christ are many things, but boring is not one of them.

It seems good, therefore, that we should launch into this new season with a look back at our baptisms. We reckon time as disciples from that fundamental event – the moment when at the font we were washed in the waters of our baptisms. Our call to worship this morning was an abbreviated account of the baptism of Jesus, by John the Baptist. John’s uncompromising message: “repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” led many into the waters of the river Jordan for the symbolic cleansing from sin; the people’s submission to John was an acknowledgement of their repentance and remorse.

The other part of John’s message, however, was just as clear and a reflective acknowledgement of his own limitations. *Yes*, John brought a powerful message of repentance, and in his preaching moved the people to a response, but he also pointed them to the one who was to come, more powerful than he. The one whose birth we just celebrated and whose baptism fulfills John’s ministry; John points us toward Jesus.

With Jesus’ baptism, the activity of God took on a new dimension. As the heaven’s opened and the Spirit descended like a dove, the experience of baptism was forever transformed. And with the declaration Jesus was ordained Jesus for the ministry to which he was born, the life, death and resurrection which is our hope and the mystery through which we also are transformed.

The power of John’s ministry is clear; not once but twice in Acts, disciples of Jesus Christ are described as deeply affected by John’s message: based on their experience of John’s baptism they began to preach and teach with energy. But for all their enthusiasm, they were operating with what we might call an ‘abbreviated’ understanding of the gos-

pel. In our passage we meet just such people; possessing deep faith, teaching and sharing what they know to be true, yet somehow missing the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Of course, repentance itself is a powerful thing. Looking candidly at our lives, reflecting on what we have or haven't been can be very productive, leading to remorse, and, hopefully, to growth and change. It's not an easy place to spend time as we discover areas in our lives where we haven't been faithful; where we've hurt those we care about; where we've been oblivious to pain in our world. None of us want to admit the depth of our need for Christ when it is so closely tied with our action and inaction. But this was John's message of preparation for the coming of Jesus: *Repent! For the Kingdom of God is at hand!* Get ready; Jesus is coming. And the message worked; his followers repented; his followers were baptized; his followers were telling the story – but they were missing something.

Luke tells us in Acts that when Paul met these disciples, he very boldly asked them whether they'd received the Holy Spirit when they were baptized. They must have been surprised by the question because they admit to not even knowing about such a thing. And so Paul took the time to help them understand the deeper meaning in their baptisms by John:

*how the baptism of Jesus had changed their own baptism –  
just as his death and resurrection had changed their lives.*

And as they listened and learned, they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, which showed forth through speaking in tongues and prophesying.

For many of us, Luke's description of the Holy Spirit's power manifested in these disciples might be a little uncomfortable. The two gifts of the spirit that Luke mentions in particular here has been the subject of much debate and even judgment through the years, leaving many of us a little reluctant to jump with both feet into a discussion of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It doesn't help that the Biblical images of the spirit seem a bit contradictory: on the one hand, the Holy Spirit descended 'like a dove' on Jesus at his baptism; on the other hand, 'tongues like flames of fire' rested on the disciples at Pentecost. If we had our druthers, we'd likely cling to image of abiding grace and gentleness offered by the dove while resisting the power and unpredictability of a fiery flame.

Several months ago I mentioned in a sermon that our family dog and wonderful companion, Tamarack, had been killed when he was hit by a car. The loss of Tamarack and the emptiness it left in our home was palpable and we longed to fill it even though we couldn't just replace him. Long before I was ready to get serious about another dog in

our home, my family was ready. In particular Patrick was actively seeking in the paper, on websites and in conversations. He and I went round and round and round about this: when the right time was, how much he missed having a dog in the house and how ‘not ready’ I was. But at some point I said, “You know how I feel and that I’m not ready – but I will leave this in your hands.” A very, very uncharacteristic move on my part – and I think we may have actually made it through another 24 hours before “Tucker the Puppy,” entered our lives, and with him, all the chaos and unpredictability you might imagine. When I told Patrick to do what he needed to do, I knew I was opening the door to this new chaos in our lives and I was doing so with a willingness to engage in it.

In baptism the door to the chaos and unpredictability of the spirit is opened and the power in it lies both in the abiding presence of the Spirit and the movement it takes in our lives. We are at once assured of the forgiveness of our sins *and* propelled out of that safe place into the dangerous territory of the spirit’s leading, where we will without a doubt, mess up, repent and be assured of our forgiveness again. When Luke describes speaking in tongues and prophecy, he’s simply telling us that the disciples engaged in the life of the church in a new and deeper way: they surrendered to the chaos and unpredictability of God’s love and power. The power of the spirit was at work in them and they were doing things and saying things they’d never done or said before.

Most of us would probably say we aren’t wired this way; we spend a great deal of energy trying to manage our time, family, friends, homes and work to the extent that life is balanced, and predictable. We resist things that will bring change and possibly chaos and we certainly don’t go out of our way to seek them out. Yet, at some level this effort denies the power of the Holy Spirit to work within us; it betrays our baptism and reduces the ministry of the church to only that which fits us as we are now.

For 2000 years the church has been asking the question: “What is God asking us to be in this time and in this place?” It’s a question that reaches forward, and can’t be answered with an accounting of what we’ve been. And, for 2000 years the church has been answering that question in public policy, through education and institutions, in community outreach and congregational worship, nurture and care. Not perfectly, not always quickly and certainly not easily – but we continue to ask and respond to the question year after year; generation after generation. The church looks different than it did 20, 40 or 60 years ago, but the difference is a result of the Holy Spirit leading us into new, unpredictable, and yes, even dangerous territory. But be assured, the danger lies in that we relinquish our control over what we’re going to be – not in God’s ability to lead us through the spirit.

In a few minutes we’re going to reaffirm the Baptismal Covenant that was made when we were baptized or will be made when we’re baptized. For most of us, those baptisms happened in a different time and place, one by one. But as we gather around the

font, reminding ourselves of that covenant, we lift up the power of the Holy Spirit that is part of each of our lives. And when we offer ourselves to Christ through the work of the church that power continues to shape who we are individually and who we are as a part of the body of Christ.