

“There’s a...WHAT?!”

(Baptism of Our Lord, 10Jan21)

Acts19:1-7, Mark1:4-11, Genesis1:1-5

“We hadn’t even heard there *was* a holy spirit!”  
You might’ve gotten the sense that I find such lines funny.

It’s like when the little Hobbits leave the Shire, venturing among larger humans for the first time and discover that beer can be served in a bigger mug. “It comes in pints?! I’m getting one!”\*  
Something good you didn’t even know possibly existed, suddenly seeming so available and obvious.

Did you get the Holy Spirit when you were baptized? Paul inquired. What?! We didn’t even know there *was* a holy spirit! And you say I can—just like that!—have a pint?! I’m getting some!

Of course, you may order *spirits* that way, but a helping of the Holy Spirit may not seem so simple as walking up to your bartender and asking for a pint-sized serving.

Still, the Spirit’s unpredicted availability stood out to me for the first time this week. In the past, I’d always believed John the Baptizer when he said that *he* baptized with water, and *another one* was coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

But is that really how it went?

Imagine a TV report on John the Baptizer, beginning with an intro off to the side: “We’ve been hearing how everyone—urban and rural—is going out to John in the wilderness. He’s in hip waders over in the Jordan River as he is baptizing with water, but he awaits someone else who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Let’s go have a closer look at John’s baptism.”

Then the camera pans to Jesus, splashing into the muddy current. Out of hundreds of others referenced, his is the only single baptism of John portrayed in the story. John plugs Jesus’ nose, dunks him into the water and—Eureka!—down comes the Holy Spirit!

John the Baptizer had just declared authoritatively that he *wasn’t* the one baptizing with the Holy Spirit when poof! no sooner are there

shredded heavens and hovering down comes the Spirit.

Yeah yeah, John didn’t do it; God did. But still, for all of his role as a prophet pointing toward God, John apparently was over-confident in his declaring how the Holy Spirit operates. After all, Jesus himself says in another place that she blows where she chooses (John 3:8).

If she blows where she chooses and she showed up in John’s baptism even when he said she wouldn’t, how in heaven’s name are we supposed to connect with her? How do you order up a helping of Holy Spirit?

Certainly we do what we can to offer assurance and confidence. Your baptism promises the presence of the Holy Spirit with you, the seal of adoption as God’s holy child. With baptism are also offered the words of blessing that will close our service today. They go with a laying on of hands—maybe to mark that you are ordained into the life of discipleship, or maybe (since there’s both baptizing and laying on of hands that go with the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the Acts reading) just to hedge our bets.

We do these things so you may have this holy comforter, this advocate, this abiding presence with you, this living breath and divine inspiration. Or not so that you may *have* the Holy Spirit, but as a way to trust *that* you have the Holy Spirit, that she blows where she chooses and she chooses you.

So why would she do that? If the Holy Spirit is so unpredictable that John the Baptizer couldn’t pin her down and she’s always out in front of our holy intentions and predictions, why would she be with you, your large serving of Spirit arriving even before you knew to ask?

Generally, I’d say it’s because you’re breathing. She gives life and breath to you and all things. She’s what sustains. She’s the binding force of love. That’s all true and good and I cling to it dearly.

But today I feel I should more directly proclaim you can know the Holy Spirit wants to show up for you because of where she is in our first reading. She’s moving over the waters, out there sweeping over the deep. Hovering, floating. Maybe again

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\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmFny-TZzRs>

with a sense from Jesus' baptism, of the dove alighting. Or a soaring, watchful eagle. An opportunistic seagull, even, ready to dive to scoop up what she wants.

Mainly with the point that the Holy Spirit has her attentive eye on you, her ready presence as you bob along, tossed about over the deeps, through the raging floods, in the violent volatile waves that crash around you.

This was a matter of chaos in that creation story, the vacancy and abandon of astonishingly empty depths. The fearful unknown, probably reflecting the dangers of boundless waters that bore storms and came to claim life from those who tried to hazard through it. An image of threatening chaos.

In all sorts of ways, you know chaos. You knew chaos in watching news from the Capitol with horror on Wednesday, when the order you thought was in place for our institutions of power seemed so tenuous, even if only temporarily before the fever of pandemonium subsided and things (hopefully) move on more as intended.

You know chaos as the orders of your life have been upset these months and you've had to figure a way forward through the upheaval, or are simply swept along by it all. You know chaos in the loss of life, in the death of loved ones, in not knowing what a new day will bring, not being able sometimes even to set simple expectations of what will happen around you or within in. You know these threats to wellbeing.

And because you know chaos, that is why today I am certain that you may know the Holy Spirit of God's very presence is hovering over you, floating down to wrap reassuring wings around you in blessing, to counteract whatever comes to claim life from you.

In never just doing what we'd wish, I'd guess she may not come scoop you out of the stormy chaos to security and order. But through the chaos, that benevolently wily, unpredictable Holy Spirit is never-failing and she will bring you to the place God intends, to the fullness of life, to this creation that God sees as good, and will give you peace, even with every quiet or gasping breath.

What's still more, just as John the Baptizer astonishingly discovered after he'd sworn it wasn't

going to be through him—but Poof, down she came!—you yourself might unexpectedly convey the Spirit to offer life and comfort and peace to others. Praise be to God.

Your voice is over the waters. And so that we may lift our praise to you, O God: Spirit, come.

Your voice is with the waters, the deeps and the rivers, the light and the darkness. With your presence in all creation, Spirit, come.

Your voice is in the midst of the raging waters. When nations rage and are in turmoil, including the surprise in our own, when injustice and racism glare, when we know we need competent institutions, we beg: Spirit, come.

Your voice is through flooding water, through all chaos, including our own struggles and all that threatens us. Be with Jean Oliverson back in the hospital, Beth Falkos' dad moving to hospice, Ellen Roberts, Julie James, Roger Pettersen, Tina Hogle's brother-in-law Jim, Barb Bickford's friend, Kebeh Gorvego's mother, Kaisa's father, Jenna Johlas, Sandra Esrael, Barb Schmiechen, Lindy Wilson, preparing for thumb surgery next Thursday, which will be followed by kazoo playing instead of flute. For comfort and the sake of life, we pray, Spirit, come.

Your voice in vast waters gives strength. We pray for those receiving and giving vaccinations, for John Rowe's sister and her husband Bill at home with COVID, for Don Tubesing, who tested positive, and Nancy, for Julie James grieving the death of a friend, for the record deaths in our country, amid 88,764 deaths this week. We need your strong voice: Spirit, come.

Your voice is in the midst of the waters, and with all of our lives for unexpected blessing. We give thanks for Rita and Rich Olson's grandson Chase Thomas as they travel to be with him. We pray for the lonely. For those who have returned to school in some form after Christmas breaks. For the gift of clean and abundant water, and for those who lack it. For these in our community this week. In all these daily places, Spirit, come.

Your voice, with the waters of baptism, joins us to the resurrection of Jesus. As we prepare for the funeral of Mary Maxwell and as we continue to grieve Jean Loichinger's death, we trust you are the breath of eternal life. Spirit, come