

The Holy Privilege

Mark 1:4-11

Acts 19:1-7

Today is the second Sunday of the year 2009 and the first Sunday after Epiphany. We are still in the beginning of the New Year. Epiphany means, "Manifestation of the Lord." Another word for Epiphany is the time of finding the light of the Lord. Have you found any light of hope for your journey through the year 2009?

In the Korean Church tradition, most Korean churches have a special worship at midnight on New Year's Eve at any given year to dedicate the first hour of the New Year to the Lord. Since we don't have such a tradition at Faith Church, on the first day of 2009, I got up early at 5:30 a.m. and went to the church to dedicate my first morning of 2009 to God on behalf of our congregation. There, I prayed and had a time of meditation for an hour, and pledged my commitment to the Lord. For me, starting the New Year with a renewed commitment to God was important.

In Italy, in a certain village, on New Year's Eve, they don't dress up and go to a festive party. They don't sing "Auld Lang Syne." They don't gather in the town square and watch a glittering ball drop to announce the exact moment when the New Year begins. No, they pretty much all stay home, and as midnight approaches, traffic on the streets begins to lessen. Soon there is no traffic at all. No cars. No pedestrians. Even the police take over because they know what's about to happen.

Then, at the precise stroke of midnight, the windows of every house in the village open up, and to the sound of music, fireworks, and laughter, people with reckless abandon begin to throw things out the windows; worn-out furniture, chipped glasses, cracked dishes, clothes gone-out-of-style, old pots and pans no longer wanted, old shoes that no longer fit, pictures of old boyfriends or girlfriends, personal items that are reminders of difficult experiences in the past year. Out the window they go. All those things that the people do not want to carry with them into the New Year go flying out the windows.

The point of this unique village custom, however, is well taken because there are indeed times in our lives when we need to make a clean sweep of it and start a new day. Whatever we do, the beginning is important.

The Gospel of Jesus is written in both the "Synoptic Gospels" and the Gospel of John. The word "Gospel" just means "Good News." The "Synoptic Gospels," literally translated "same eye," refer to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because these three Gospels present a similar view of the story of Jesus' life. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are written based on the foundation of the text of the Gospel of Mark, which is the earliest written Gospel—about the year 70 AD or so. The Gospel of John,

on the other hand, has unique origins and does not use the text of the Gospel of Mark as its foundation.

So, especially in the "Synoptic Gospels," the Gospel of Jesus is similar in content and in order. Matthew and Luke start their writing with the story of the birth of Jesus. But in Mark, today's scripture reading is quite different from the way Matthew and Luke begin their passages. Mark begins its writing with the story of the Baptism of Jesus. In its introduction to Jesus' life and teaching, Mark starts its story with the Jesus' Baptism. It tells us something for our life. Mark saw the Baptism of Jesus as the starting point of Jesus' Gospel. The starting point of Jesus' Good News!

Adopting Mark's point of view, I would like to speak about three ways in which the faith of Baptism marks a turning point for our lives. Since Christian Baptism offered to us in the name of Jesus brings us the Holy Privilege of Christian life, let's start our life in 2009 with the faith of the Baptism.

Baptism holds three the components of grace, blessing, and gift of the Lord. The first authentic preacher in Christian history, St. Peter, preached: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."(Acts 2:38-39)

The first ways in which the faith of Baptism marks a turning point for our lives is that Baptism is a sign of the cleansing of sin. The issue of sin is a fundamental and ultimate issue of human life. Most of people feel fear when one meets a catastrophe because human beings are beings of spirit, sensitive in conscience to sin. Therefore, the problem of sin must be a fundamental and ultimate issue which can not be ignored.

Baptism is a ritual with water in the Christian Church. It is a covenantal ritual between a person and God, in the witness of the congregation. Water is a symbol of washing away of sin. It is the grace of God that gives the gift of the washing away of sin to the ones who believe in God by repentance and are baptized. No condemnation, no punishment and no death is exacted by sin, but rather the gift of life by grace. That is the beginning point of the Christian life and the first step in believing in God. The gift of the cleansing of sins through Baptism is like the New Year's ritual in the Italian village: out the window go all those things that we don't want to carry any further.

Second, Baptism is the symbol of new life. Baptism with water is the blessing and privilege to the believers. It is also a symbol that our lives are totally buried in water and raised from it, free from the old life that has been buried, and free to be a new being, of water and the Spirit. Pouring or sprinkling of water upon the head of a person being baptized also signifies God's pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

Some believers think that there is some special type of water, "Holy Water" used for the cleansing of sin and bestowing of blessing. A few days ago I received an email with an attachment that had some type of blessings and curses. At the end the sender said "If

you find this attachment, make twenty copies and send to those whom you are considering, then you will have some good luck unexpected, and if you do not send these copies within twenty days, you will have an unfortunate happening in your life. Do you believe this? I don't. Of course, I did ignore it. There is no such a thing in life—there is no magic “Holy Water,” only the real and living grace of God.

A few years ago, a young Catholic priest finished his seminary training and was appointed to serve a church in Loveland, Colorado. He was so excited to begin his ministry. On his first Sunday there, he looked out the window of his study and was thrilled to see so many people driving into the parking lot. The cars were lined up back-to-back.

"Wow," he said out loud, "we're going to have a packed house today!" However, just a few minutes later, when he walked into sanctuary to begin the Mass, he was stunned to see that there were only fifteen or twenty people sitting in the pews. He was concerned, disappointed, and mystified by this. Where were all of those people? All of those cars were pouring into lot just moments ago, but where were the people? Amazingly, the next Sunday the same thing happened. A lot of people drove into the parking lot, got out of their cars, came around to the entrance of the church, and entered the front door. Yet when the priest stepped into the sanctuary to start the Mass, only a handful of people were there.

On the third Sunday, the young priest decided to get to the bottom of this. So instead of peering out the window toward the parking lot, he went around and positioned himself where he could discreetly see the entrance to the church. Immediately the mystery was solved. Sure enough, the people were driving into the parking lot in large numbers. Sure enough, they were coming around and entering the front door of the church. However, instead of coming all the way into the church and taking their place in the pews, these people were stepping in just far enough to dip their fingers in the holy water and make the sign of the cross, but then they would scurry out of the church, get back into their cars, and drive off to other pursuits.

The people were coming in just far enough to get the holy water. What does holy mean? There is no “Holy Water” in essence. But there is Holy Water in our faith that we are baptized by the water and spirit, in the name of the Lord. As long as you believe in the Baptism of the Lord, therein lies the Holy Water in your life which blesses, cleanses, and gives you new life. The water is symbol of life. So Jesus said, “I am the living water that gives eternal life.”

Lastly, Baptism is the gift of the power of the Lord. I heard this story long time ago from a clergy friend. A man visited a church and knocked on the door of a United Methodist Church whose pastor was a woman. The man was a member of the Mafia which were deeply involved in organized drug dealing in the New York area. Anyone could tell by the looks of this man, his face knife scarred, that he must be a gangster. However, a woman pastor welcomed him to the church without hesitation or fear.

In time, the man became a member of that church by profession of faith and baptism. He was totally changed and became like a gentle sheep by his pastor's guidance. And a few years later, as he walked on a street in New York, he was found and caught by the former boss of the Mafia. A few years earlier, he had actually run away from the Mafia members and become Christian. And now, he was caught by the terrible boss of the Mafia. If it had been a few years ago, he would have been terrified like a mouse caught by a cat. But this time he was not. He held himself up in front of the old boss as if he had a new boss, a boss with a great background of power.

The old boss of the Mafia asked him "who is your boss and what do you do under Him?" The man said, "You know what, I found a big boss in my life. I swore to him that I will give my life to him, and then The Big Boss said, 'I will guarantee that you will not ever be going to jail eternally no matter what you did before, and I will protect you from whoever your enemy is.'" He was so gutsy in front of the old boss that the boss became very interested in the big, Big Boss. Finally the old boss was led by the Christian man to his woman pastor. And he became another gutsy Christian.

Again, let us be reminded of St. Peter's preaching, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

What is the gift of Holy Spirit? I confess that the gift of the Holy Spirit is exactly the same as the power, the guts which the old Mafia man who became a Christian had. Don't be afraid of anything because you have the gift of God, the power of God which conquers any evil in life! That is the faith of Baptism, the Holy Privilege we have. Let's start the New Year with a renewed faith and commitment to God.