

SERMON TITLE: "Developing Spiritual Strength for Life's Challenges"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:22-24, 37-42 (Children's Sermon: Mt. 3:13-17)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 12, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Lilla and Killian's mother Sarah Randall contacted me in early December to tell me that the kids wanted to be baptized. As we started talking about possible Sundays to do that, it seemed like today would be a good fit. Because of the traditional Christian calendar, this second Sunday of January is the most common day for churches everywhere to read the story about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. Baptism for any of us is a pretty big event, but to be baptized on the same day that Christians around the world are celebrating Jesus' baptism—that's pretty cool, don't you think?

Of course, any time we talk about Jesus' baptism or baptize anyone in our congregation, such an act is a great time for all of us to recall the baptismal vows which either we made for ourselves or our parents made on our behalf. Any time a child, youth, or adult is baptized in our church, that sacrament of washing away sin and initiation into the community of faith provides an opportunity for each of us to renew our own commitment to God.

In worship this month, we're talking about developing strength for the inevitable challenges life will throw at us. Last week, we talked about how—while we might not know everything that's going to happen to us in this new year—we certainly know that every challenge in life is easier if we're physically healthy and strong. In the upcoming weeks, we'll explore relational strengths and skill strengths. Today, though, as we recall and reaffirm our own baptisms, I want us to look at the baptism story in Acts chapter two, and see how we might go about developing spiritual strength for life's challenges.

1—MIRACULOUS, MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Many of you recognize this Acts 2 story as what happened on the Day of Pentecost. The first part of Acts 2 tells that the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus with wind and fire, causing them to

speak in foreign languages. Those miraculous and mystical experiences on the Day of Pentecost fit well with what the disciples and others had observed and experienced with Jesus as he had traveled around Galilee and Judea healing the sick and feeding the multitudes. As Peter preached in verse 22: “Jesus of Nazareth” had been “attested to [them] by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God [had done] through him and among” the Israelites. Even after Jesus was crucified, God freed Jesus from death in a miraculous resurrection.

In and through Jesus, God had come to the people in wonders and power. Now, on the Day of Pentecost, God was working through the Holy Spirit to provide another kind of miraculous and mystical experience that could ignite their Christian faith and boost their spiritual strength.

Having such a wondrous and mystical experience can be an incredible help to us today, as well. For those of us who want to develop our spiritual strength, there’s nothing quite like a miracle of healing, a profound sense of God’s peace, a tingling of goose bumps, a feeling of power and awe, a sudden clarity of vision, or an amazement of wonder and beauty to enhance and improve our spiritual condition.

Many of you know what I’m talking about because you’ve had one or more of these mystical experiences yourself. Standing on the top of a mountain or on the beach of the ocean, you’ve felt the awe, beauty, and power of God’s creation. Holding a newborn baby, you’ve been overcome by the miracle of life that God gives us. Beaming with pride over the accomplishment of your team, your family, your children, and even yourself, you’ve sensed the thrill of divine power that can exponentially expand who we are and what we can do. In the middle of the night, in a hospital room, or in an otherwise dark and difficult season, you’ve seen a vision or heard the voice of God providing assurance, guidance, hope, and a sense of calling. Those visceral, sensory, and emotional experiences are so memorable, so core, and so foundational to our spiritual being that they provide us with great spiritual strength.

2—GUILT, REPENTANCE, AND FORGIVENESS

If you're a person who can't recall ever having had a miraculous or mystical experience, I encourage you to open yourself to this possibility. Fortunately, though, our spiritual strength isn't dependent on awesomely *wonderful* experiences alone. A second means of developing our spiritual strength is through guilt, repentance, and forgiveness. We see this in Acts 2:37. When the Jewish crowds understood that they were, in some way, responsible for the death of the Messiah, they were "cut to the heart." In other words, they felt guilty and sad for what they had done. They wanted to know what they should do, and Peter told them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. When the people were washed clean in the waters of baptism, and accepted this forgiveness in Jesus' name, they turned away from the corruption of their generation and received the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Today, we hear similar wording in our baptismal and membership vows. Our sorrow for what we have done wrong and our promises to turn away from evil, to seek and accept the power of God, and to nurture ourselves in the Christian faith are huge steps forward in spiritual strength development. While even longtime and faithful Christians need to repent and seek forgiveness on a regular basis, right now I'm talking about those major times in life when we very consciously decide to turn away from sin and commit ourselves to following Jesus. Those turning points are precious to us because they are markers along our journey. Guilt, repentance, and forgiveness are signposts of developing spiritual strength.

3—SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Although mystically awesome and guilt-inspired conversion experiences may only happen occasionally, a third way to develop our spiritual strength could and should be a regular spiritual habit. In Acts 2:42 and following, we see that the new Christian believers developed their spiritual strength through a variety of weekly and daily spiritual disciplines. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. They participated in Christian fellowship with other believers. They broke bread together and

prayed together. They praised God at the temple together. And they generously shared their material possessions with those in need.

These regular spiritual disciplines of study, worship, fellowship, and mission outreach are critical to our spiritual strength today, as well. Many of us know of someone who had a mystical experience but then turned away from God. Probably everyone in this room knows of someone who was baptized and joined a church, but then wandered in a different direction. That's why daily and weekly spiritual disciplines are so important. We need to keep our attention focused on God and Christ. We need to make sure our spiritual skills aren't becoming stagnant—but are fresh, alive, and growing. We need to make sure that we don't forget the power of God to forgive and transform. That's why we get together as a church, so we can encourage and strengthen each other to keep on developing spiritually.

Besides the spiritual disciplines we do together, the best spiritual development also includes regular individual devotional time with God. That can be done through Bible reading, prayer, singing songs, silent meditation, listening to Christian music, reading devotional books or blogs, saying grace before meals, and lots of other ways. The point is that you should take ownership of your faith. Spiritual vitality doesn't come from being a passive, Sunday-only spectator. Your faith is who you choose to be every day as an actively-involved and committed follower of Jesus Christ.

Do you hear what I'm saying? Having good spiritual habits is critical to maintaining and improving our spiritual strength. And the beginning of a new year is a natural time to step up our spiritual disciplines. Where is your weak area? What do you want to work on? Will you attend worship more Sundays per month? Will you start participating in a Sunday School or weekday class? Will you take home an Upper Room devotional magazine and begin spending some intentional minutes with God every day? Will you do mission outreach? Will you read Bible stories with your children or grandchildren and pray with them before dinner or bedtime? Will you volunteer to clean church restrooms and whistle some hymns while you work? Will you get involved with the United Methodist Men or Women? I'm sure

you know where you are weak or could use some improvement. As this new year begins, I hope you will make plans to develop your strength with some regular spiritual disciplines.

CONCLUSION

Over the past couple weeks, my husband and I have been asking for your prayers for Steve and his family, as they've been out in western Oregon moving his 94-year old mother into an assisted living home. A few evenings ago, I spoke with Cordelia by phone. When I asked her how she was doing in her new surroundings, she said it was "terrible." She was sure she didn't belong in a place where people were in such bad shape. But the reality is, Cordelia can no longer walk, and her hands are so gnarled with arthritis that she can barely use them. She needs assistance with her activities of daily living.

Fortunately, Cordelia has been able to draw upon her Christian faith for comfort and strength in this "terrible" time. She said the TV channels are different there, but she finally found her favorite religious program, so she can now have her daily devotions every morning. Being able to continue her lifelong spiritual disciplines helps her to thank God for the kind assistance of the senior home staff, to be grateful for the love and help of her family, and to look for the other positive blessings even in this "terrible" situation.

That's pretty good, don't you think? God never promised that our lives would be easy. Hardships are bound to come our way. But we'll be much more ready to face them if we've been developing spiritual strength for life's challenges.