I’d like to start this morning by looking back at a couple of the readings we just heard. First, from Luke 3: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him . . .” (21-22a). And, then, from Acts 8: “The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (15-17). Now, I know that the first Sunday after the Epiphany is often called “Baptism of Christ” Sunday, and we were given lessons that contained the word “baptize”. So—maybe like you—I immediately assumed that the lessons were about baptism. But, as I read these more closely this past week, it occurred to me that they are more about something like confirmation, and its implications, than “baptism” proper.

In the reading from Luke, we’re told that Jesus was baptized, and then was praying. We don’t know how soon, or how long, after his baptism he was found in prayer. But, in Luke’s telling of the story, it was while he was praying that “the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove”. In the selection from Acts, some Samaritans “had . . . been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus”. But they had not received the Holy Spirit, which, our reading indicates, was bestowed in the context of prayer. It seems to me, then, that, yes, baptism is part of these readings, but not necessarily any more significant for mission than the subsequent reception of the Holy Spirit. So, since we’ll have a baptism next week, providing another opportunity for reflecting on that rite, I’ll put the cart before the horse, and focus on another Christian initiation rite, Confirmation, and what follows.

I would suspect that most, but not all, of you have been confirmed? But, how many of you have re-affirmed your baptism vows? And how many of you have been to a confirmation not your own? Well, if you’ve been to a confirmation (your own or another’s) in the last several years, AND someone has reaffirmed their baptismal vows, you would have heard these prayers by the Bishop over the candidates — at Confirmation: “Strengthen, O Lord, your [servants] with your Holy Spirit; empower [them] for your service; and sustain [them] all the days of [their] lives” (BCP, 418). And, for Reaffirmation — and a bit more significantly: “[M]ay the Holy Spirit, who has begun a good work in you, direct and uphold you in the service of Christ and his kingdom” (BCP, 419). In both cases, the prayers suggest that the bestowal of the Holy Spirit adds something significant to the baptized . . . perhaps hinting at a sense of “completion”, but certainly a sense of empowerment. With that in mind, I think it’s worth spending a little time on this somewhat confusing rite of Confirmation.

How “Confirmation” developed isn’t quite straightforward. But I would say that we have a source for the practice in these texts. More, of course, happened over the course of the centuries, primarily in Western Christianity. The early Christian, and current Eastern Orthodox, practice is to “confirm” those who are baptized immediately after baptism; there is no separation of the ceremonies. But the East didn’t experience some of the controversies and expansion of the faith in quite the same way as did the West. In both the West and the East, however, baptism and confirmation have had to do with bishops; that is, being in communion with the Bishop, since the
earliest baptismal responsibilities fell to the Bishop, a practice reflected in our current theology, who if present should preside (see BCP, p. 298).

You may remember that over the first few centuries of the Church’s history, early Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire. During those persecutions, many Christians “fell away” from the faith — in order to save their lives! But, during the reign of Constantine, after Christianity became the religion of the Empire, some of these folks wanted back in! And the question became “How to readmit those who wished it”. A rival, more permissive, church, had arisen during those years, so the question was really about which church — that is, which bishop one was in communion with. Readmission meant that the penitent would “confirm” his/her faith in Catholic teaching to the bishop.

Another, unrelated, historical development in the West also influenced the practice. As I’ve said, “Confirmation” is all about bishops. Indeed, in the earliest years of the Church, as I mentioned, bishops did all of the baptisms AND confirmations. But the church in the West expanded so quickly and broadly that there were too few bishops to handle the responsibility, and the rite of baptism was delegated to priests. The bishops, then, on their “rounds” would “confirm” what had happened during baptism. One source indicated that if you were within seven miles, you needed to take that baby to the bishop!

There are yet a couple more influences in our modern practices. One relates to developments related to the Reformation about which I spoke several weeks ago — that is, the notion of Believer’s Baptism. Emerging from the belief that a declaration of faith should be made by an adult, and that many in the Church had been baptized before they could make such a declaration, “Confirmation” allowed those baptized-as-infant folks to make an “adult” decision and declaration. And the last, admittedly less theological, influence was the the association of “Confirmation” with various coming-of-age rituals — a Christian version of a Bar Mitzvah, for example.

To return to what I said earlier, however, the key point in all of this was that while something clearly significant happened in baptism — indeed current Anglican theology asserts that baptism constitutes full inclusion in the Church — that while something significant happened, there could be more. We see that in the New Testament texts, certainly. But the historical development of the gift of the Holy Spirit, combined with a theology that located that with the power of the bishop, helped birth a separate rite.

Much of what we’re seeing here is a recognition that, while baptism — entry into the Body of Christ — is a first step, it is only that, a first step. Much as being born into a family incorporates the infant into that family, as the child grows, it learns what being a part of the family is all about. There are expectations. There are rules for behavior. Questions of decorum and manners are raised. Certainly we see the parallels between human family development and church “family” development spelled out in the New Testament. Those of us who are reading the book of Romans will see that pretty clearly when we get closer to the end of the book.

But, here I want to look a few verses earlier in Luke, for a more theological look at the “next steps” after baptism. To return to our story, John the Baptist told those who were coming to him, seeking baptism for the forgiveness of sins, that he could indeed do that, but that there was more. Another was coming after him who would take the commitment to repentance and conversion even further; that one would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, and would separate the wheat from the chaff (Lk 3.16-17). And, immediately, in the story, we read the account of Jesus’ being filled with the Holy Spirit after his baptism, followed, in the next chapter, by his journey into the wilderness of temptation and visioning. Jesus’ experience, outlined in our reading this morning, and in the next
chapter — indeed the rest of the Gospel — as well as the little story of the Samaritans who’d only received the baptism of “the Lord Jesus”, points to an evolving Christian life and mission. That is, baptism is not the be-all and end-all. Certainly our theology asserts that baptism IS the way into the Christian family, but there’s more to come.

The “more” is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, that animating force of the Divine, who, at Creation “brooded over the waters” and helped birth the world as we know it, separating light from darkness, waters from land. In our reading this morning, John tells us that there will be a separation of the wheat from the chaff . . . related to a “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” The “wheat/chaff” metaphor, according to some scholars, pointed to a separation in the early Christian community between those who would remain faithful to the early Jesus movement, and those who would fall away. Or, to return to our “history of Confirmation” the “wheat” would remain in communion with the Bishop, while the chaff would blow away. That, I imagine, is probably true! But I think that’s not all, especially today.

After our baptisms, in our various practices of prayer—both private and corporate—we open ourselves up to the transformative power of the Spirit. There is no one of us who does not have “chaff” in our life that does not need to be blown away. Some things, clearly, cling more closely than others. The same is true for us as a congregation. WE have chaff that needs winnowing. Don’t get me wrong . . . chaff gets a bad rap! It was certainly necessary, as the kernel of wheat was developing, to protect the grain as it grew. But at the point when the grain is ready for harvest — to be useful — the chaff is no longer necessary. The accompanying image of “fire” makes vivid that idea that, as in the smelting of metal, what is unnecessary must be burned away.

I clearly remember my baptism, a little over fifty years ago. But I also remember my confirmation, almost forty years ago. After the singing of “O Come Holy Spirit”, I knelt before Bp. Swing, and he dipped his thumb in the oil and traced the sign of the cross on my forehead. THAT oil had been scented with cinnamon oil. Oh, it smelled good! But, as you might expect with cinnamon, that cross on my forehead burned! The process of purging away the chaff began anew, and, for me, continues still. May it be so for you, and for Good Shepherd, in the days and weeks to come.

Come down, O Love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing.

O let it freely burn,
Till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming.

For none can guess its grace,
Till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling

Amen.