

“Come to the Waters”

Luke 3:15-22

Rev. Meredith Loftis

January 13, 2019 - Baptism of the Lord

Epiphany Sunday, which marks the revelation of the Christ child to the magi and therefore Gentiles, passed us quickly by this past Sunday. A star alighted in the sky, indicating a new and startling thing. We remember when wise men, non-Jews from the East, traveled by following that star that led them to God incarnate and they honored this newborn king with precious gifts. They befuddle King Herod’s plans to worship Christ after they learned Herod meant to kill the child; instead traveling home another way while Jesus and his family fled to Egypt for a time. Today, we turn to Baptism of the Lord Sunday and quickly jump to an adult Jesus and witness his baptism according to the Gospel of Luke. Hear now Luke’s version from Luke 3:15-22:

***15** As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, **16** John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

***18** So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. **19** But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, **20** added to them all by shutting up John in prison.*

***21** Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, **22** and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

I have many things in my ministry that I’m blessed to do, but one of the most precious and sacred tasks is the honor of coming to the waters of baptism, dipping my hand in the font three times, and laying my hand on a new member of God’s church. As a tiny baby, teenager, or adult feels those baptismal waters run down their forehead, we tell that person that before a word or thought could cross your mind, God had already claimed you. We baptize in the name of the Trinity and then we turn to all of you and tell you to what?....Remember your own baptisms. Remember how God claimed you and how your church family promised to nurture and teach you all it means to be claimed by God. If you’re like me, it’s a bit difficult, since I was less than a year old when I was baptized. But joy is rekindled, if even I can’t remember mine, whenever we come to the waters with a new child of God to welcome. Joy is a flame throughout my mind and heart that God chose me and chooses each of us. And the Spirit of God moves through us as we witness a mysterious yet joyful thing happen in this sacrament.

Saint Augustine, who lived in the 5th century, once beautifully coined the definition of a sacrament as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” This holy ritual signals a newness that only God can grant; a newness that never grows old, but sustains us. It is

by the sheer grace of God, we are surrounded and upheld every day. Baptism is a holy reminder that when each of us come to the waters, we are claimed by God, and God is pleased by us, pleased to gift us with God's Spirit that shows us how to live into the calling of a baptized child of God.

We turn to the banks of the Jordan River where Jesus' baptism is set amidst a great multitude of people who have become enthralled by that eccentric man that wears camel hair and eats bugs, John the Baptist. Luke's version of events shows Jesus as just one of the many people who are waiting to be baptized. These people have gathered to see John, expecting that perhaps he is the Messiah, for he has been preaching a new way that they had not heard before. John and his disciples have been creating quite a racket, eventually attracting the attention of Herod, about the call to repentance, to change their ways, and to ready themselves, even captivating corrupt tax collectors and Roman soldiers who want to be a part of this new era that is about to arrive. "Could this be the Messiah?" the people think. "Is this who we've been waiting for to save us?" But quickly John distinguishes himself. "I baptize you with water," said John, "But one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

In the gospel of Matthew, we see John argue with Jesus, a startling scene probably for those around watching. John insists that in fact Jesus should baptize him! But Jesus says, 'No, this is the right way to do it. This is how we fulfill the righteousness that is to come.' John acquiesces, and Jesus is immersed in the Jordan by the baptizer's hands.

Luke's Jesus arrives on the scene with little fanfare; in fact, John has already been arrested by Herod, and lays in wait in prison, with only days left to live. So, we see a shift from the old covenant of John to the new age as Jesus arrives and prepares to begin his ministry. And yet he arrives unannounced and unnoticed; he is just "with 'all the people' - but maybe that is what the church has sometimes forgotten. Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinners. Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had been broken by the 'wear and tear' of this selfish world and had all but given up on themselves and their God. When the line of downtrodden and sin-sick people formed in hopes of new beginnings through a return to God, Jesus joined them. At his baptism, he identified with the damaged and broken people who needed God."¹ Throughout his ministry, Jesus continues to show us what a life marked by baptism means—that we encounter brokenness again and again and we love the brokenness anyway. We seek those out and say to them, you are already loved and claimed. God has not forgotten you. What breaks us does not define us. What defines us is God's love.

And yet it is more than just solidarity that Jesus seeks. "Jesus was born *from* as well as *into* a world of systemic sin, and his baptism is a signal that he understood the full implications of the incarnation. He was not merely identifying with or showing solidarity with the human world; he was fully acknowledging its tragic structure."² Jesus chooses repeatedly to be a part of that tragic, broken structure, noting each and every person he encounters is called beloved by God; each is invited to a new age with a God that desires every part of us; and shows us what it means to live as a chosen child of God.

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 236.

² *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 238.

Jesus showed us first—the first born of God’s new creation. The life he lived is the life we are invited to live when we embrace our baptismal vows.

And though it’s unclear whether the newly baptized crowd on the banks of the Jordan River witnesses the heavens splitting apart, we readers are privy to the astonishing scene. As the heavens open, the clouds skirt aside, the sun shines brighter as the rays of light illuminate a dove-like form descending, never wavering in its journey, but rests upon Jesus’ wet body. And a voice unlike any other rings out, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Each time we come to the waters, this is what we are to imagine for ourselves. These same lines, “You are my Son...my daughter; with you I am well pleased.”

We are welcomed and claimed;

Washed clean and made whole because God willed it through Jesus Christ.

The Spirit is gifted to us despite who we are.

The waters bring new life despite what we’ve done.

God is with us and calls us his own.

In that critically acclaimed drama, *Toy Story*, set in a little boy’s room, we learn that after we leave our homes behind, the toys wake up and have a life of their own. The star of this movie, Sheriff Woody, an old pull-string cowboy doll, is the leader of this group of nursery toys. After a new toy arrives, Buzz Lightyear, who is the latest and greatest of all toys, Woody starts to panic that he’ll be forgotten. In a moving scene that shows a flashback from Woody’s memory, we see that he is reminded how much, Andy, his little boy loves him and takes a black marker and writes his name on the bottom of Woody’s left boot, forever marking him as his, and his alone. It is the same with God. It might not be black marker we bear, but only water, but it is a powerful claim about who God is and who we are.

Theologian John Leith wrote, “Every human life is rooted in the will and intention of God: ‘In baptism the child’s name is called because our faith is that God thought of this child before the child was, that God gave to this child an identity, an individuality, a name, and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. Human existence has its origin not in the accidents of history and biology, but in the will and intention of the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth.’”³

God’s intention for us is to love and embrace the baptism that marks us as claimed; in turn we live as those that see the fullness of every child of God we encounter, for our baptismal vows include cultivating that divine love around us. We will see/have seen many of our own church family claim their calls and fulfill their baptismal vows by becoming elders and deacons to serve our church. We embrace our baptisms even more when we acknowledge that each person we encounter is also a child of God, whether water has touched their brow or not.

“In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in, of all places, Gatlinburg, TN in the Smoky Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. ‘I been around these parts a while,’ he said. [After learning Craddock was a seminary professor, he said, ‘Boy, do I have a story for you.’] ‘My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy

³ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 240.

was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the back and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. 'In fact, that was the beginning of my life.'⁴

"Whenever anybody asked me, 'Who's your Daddy?' I'd just tell them, 'I'm a Child of God'." The distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, "Isn't that a great story?"

The professor responded that it really was a great story!

As the man turned to leave, he said, "You know, if that new preacher hadn't told me that I was one of God's children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!" And he walked away.

The seminary professor [Fred Craddock] and his wife were stunned. He called the waitress over and asked her, "Do you know who that man was who just left that was sitting at our table?"

The waitress grinned and said, "Of course. Everybody here knows him. That's Ben Hooper. He's the former governor of Tennessee!"⁵

Ben Hooper served as governor from 1911 to 1915. He allowed God's claim on him to renew him, which granted him life that he'd never imagined otherwise.

So today, we are asked to remember our baptisms and the grace that continues to transform us into God's people. But it's not always easy to remember.

"The great Protestant Martin Luther [our forefather who nailed the 95 theses on the Catholic door and started the Reformation] was plagued at times by an overwhelming sense of great unworthiness and despair. To drive back those demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read, "Remember, you have been baptized." Often, he would touch his forehead and remind himself, 'Martin, you have been baptized.'"⁶

And so that is what I ask each of you to do for a second today. Place your hand on your forehead, baptized or not, and breathe in the words, "Remember, you have been baptized. You are a child of God."

⁴ http://day1.org/1678-god_believes_in_you

⁵ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/whos-your-daddy/>

⁶ http://day1.org/1678-god_believes_in_you