

Epiphany & Baptism of Jesus

January 8, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Psalm 51: 6-17; Luke 3: 1-22

“And the *Word became flesh* and lived among us”
Lord, help us hear your Word and see your glory. Amen

What in the world kept those crowds at the Jordan? After being called a brood of vipers trying to escape God’s judgement... after being told their Hebrew religious affiliation offered absolutely no safety or assurance... after hearing that fruitless trees like us were due to be cut and burned — I’m a bit surprised that John the Baptizer didn’t get stoned and driven back into the wilderness where he came from? Like the prophets of old, John spoke on behalf of God with the power of the Holy Spirit... he called people to repent, to turn away from sin and idols and be washed in God’s forgiveness. Was it the fresh start that appealed? Or had the same Spirit that gave John the passion and words for his mission enter into their lives, giving them a hunger for something more, something beyond what this world had to offer?

This was quite a crowd — a blend of average peasant folks and the tax collectors and mercenary soldiers the others considered exploiters and enemies. Yet each asked, “what should we do?” That question and the desires it expresses IS the Holy Spirit of God at work in lives. What should you do? Beyond a baptism of forgiveness, John told them to take every opportunity to do God’s will and be God’s people: Share with those in need. Be fair in your dealings with other. Don’t use power to bully or for unjust gain. These are the temptations and opportunities we meet day in and day out, no matter who we are. Share. Be fair. Don’t bully. John is announcing that the arriving Messiah isn’t interested in a one-time dunk and half-hearted promises. The Messiah is coming to empower living that glorifies God and enacts God’s kingdom ways. Like the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem announced, John also proclaimed that the expected Messiah is coming for ALL people, whether they are poor, wealthy, man or woman, Roman collaborator or staunch opponent. The Savior was coming for all and, what’s more, each can serve him and his kingdom in

their daily lives. THIS is the very good news John offered those who stayed after his humbling fire and brimstone greeting. God is for you and with you and you have a meaningful part in God's coming kingdom. It's still good news for us... and for all people.

When Jesus steps into the Jordan to be baptized, the good news John has proclaimed and the kingdom of God takes flesh. It is a moment of profound revelation — an epiphany. God has come to dwell in and among our humanity. When Jesus steps into the Jordan, it was not to repent and receive God's forgiveness. He stepped into the Jordan in solidarity with us. He had it publicly confirmed that he was gifted with the power of the Holy Spirit and the unconditional love of the Father. He then stepped out, claimed and called, to begin his ministry, teaching, trials and triumphs for us.

We celebrate the baptism of Jesus each year. We stand on the Jordan watching Jesus go in and come out each year. We see the power of the Holy Spirit descend like a dove and hear God's voice proclaim "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" each year. But do we appreciate, do we realize that we are also watching our own baptism? Whether you were submerged in water, or had water sprinkled or poured on you. Whether you were an infant, child, teen or adult when you were baptized, what happened to Jesus in the Jordan is what happened to you and I and every other person baptized in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

At whatever font, bowl, pool or river in which you were baptized you received your identity. "YOU are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." "You are my daughter, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." "Baptism teaches us who we are — God's beloved children — and confers upon us the promise of God's unconditional regard"¹ and love. We know who we are because we know whose we are. God claims us as one of God's own children at our baptism. "We belong to God. [We belong to God]'s family, and baptism is the tangible sign of that."²

In Luke's telling of Jesus' baptism, John the baptizer is nowhere to be found. In fact, we are told he is in prison. So who baptized Jesus? "The Holy Spirit descended upon

him in bodily form like a dove.” Luke wants us to know that the same Holy Spirit that baptized Jesus baptized us. Like Jesus in the Jordan, we did not say or do anything to earn, win or deserve God’s love and eternal acceptance at our baptism.”Baptism... is wholly God’s work that we may have confidence that no matter how often we fall short or fail, nothing that we do or fail to do can remove the identity that God conveys as gift.³ You are my beloved son.... you are my beloved daughter. David Lose puts it this way:

“Our relationship with God... is the one relationship in life we can’t mess up precisely because we did not establish it. We can neglect this relationship, we can deny it, run away from it, ignore it, but we cannot destroy it, for God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go.... Trusting that this relationship is in God’s hands, we are freed to give ourselves wholly and completely to the other important relationships in our lives”⁴ and to our calling into God’s saving work for the sake of the world.”

Not only did we find our identity at baptism, but another remarkable thing takes place — God calls and sends us out to carry on the family name, to make our Father proud, to continue the family business of loving, healing, feeding, restoring the world. At our baptism, our Lord gave our lives purpose and the “strength that comes from another world enabling us to will and work”⁵ and live to please our Lord.

Pastor Michael Brown spoke about a man he knew who “volunteers [to work] on a minimum of two Habitat for Humanity houses a year. He's quite a gifted carpenter and can get twice the work done in half the time it takes most people. Some years he works on five or six Habitat projects, but he has made both God and himself a promise that he will always do at least two. He's honored that commitment for over thirty years.

Pastor Brown asked him once about the source of his passion for that ministry, and he told the pastor his story. After returning from Vietnam, he struggled to readjust. He had no close family structure, so he drifted ... town to town, job to job. The one thing he did have was a talent for carpentry, so he could usually find a building site that needed an extra hand. Finally, in a small Midwestern town, he signed on to help build a development of six moderately sized and affordably priced houses. He told the foreman that he would

be happy not only to do carpentry but also to provide security, bringing his sleeping bag with him and spending the nights on site. So he did that, house by house. The owner of the company was impressed by the man's abilities and commitment--and he was also aware that apparently he had no other place to sleep. So, at the close of the project, almost a year in the making, the business owner took the man aside and said: "I want to thank you for what you've done. And I want you to stay on with the company." Then he handed the man a set of keys and said: "The sixth house we built is yours. Take it." "But I can't pay for it," the carpenter said," to which his employer answered: "You'll find a way." "My volunteer work," he told Pastor Brown, "is how I have repaid him. At least twice a year I put a roof over the head of someone else who needs it, just as he did over mine."

“Baptism symbolizes that we are loved free of charge. Someone special claims us, asks us to stay on with the company, to be part of the family."This is My beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." And that act of grace loves us into loving. Remembering. our Baptism, we grow so overwhelmed by being claimed by God that we grow a powerful sense of being called. "The Spirit descends as a dove" and settles into our hearts, and we want to pay all the favors of grace forward, sharing with others the gift that has been shared with us. ⁶

And so, on this Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, remember your Baptism ... remember who and whose we are — you are God's own son or daughter and that can never be taken away. Remember your baptism — remember our outrageous and holy calling to share in God's work to redeem and transform the world. Remember your baptism so you can continue to grow into it. Remember each day as you wash your hands before a meal or bathe or shower, say something like "I am God's beloved child, called and sent to make a difference in the world."⁷ It's the truth and what freedom, meaning and power it sets loose for the good of the world. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 1/7/17

ENDNOTES

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1. David Lose, "Preaching a More Meaningful Baptism" January 6, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.
 2. David Lose, "Preaching a More Meaningful Baptism" January 6, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.
 3. David Lose, "Preaching a More Meaningful Baptism" January 6, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.
 4. David Lose, "Preaching a More Meaningful Baptism" January 6, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.
 5. Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams, "God Believes in You," January 10, 2010 as posted on <http://day1.org>
 6. The Rev. Dr. Michael Brown, " Does Baptism Matter?" January 13, 2013 as posted on http://day1.org/4406-does_baptism_matter.print
 7. David Lose, "Preaching a More Meaningful Baptism" January 6, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.