

The Baptism of our Lord

January 9, 2022

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, Maryland

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Grace and peace from God --- Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you can forgive the grammar, a child once wisely said, “Jesus was the best picture of God that was ever took.” It’s exactly what Luke wants to emphasize in his telling of the baptism and life of Jesus. With the magi and stars still in mind, we take our seat on the banks of the Jordan River each first Sunday of the Epiphany season. Here, like in Bethlehem, we see God’s desire and passion to be known intersect with our human yearning to know God. Luke points a finger at Jesus as if to say, “There... there is the best picture of God ever took. It began in a simple stable but now see God-with-us move into the world. You’ll want to keep your eye on him.”

From the Jordan’s shore, we see Jesus as a grown man, obedient to God, who realizes the moment has arrived to begin the public ministry for which he has been called. Jesus wades through the waters of Baptism and while he is still dripping, the distance between heaven and earth disappears like it did that night in Bethlehem. But it’s not angels who are sent with messages and song. God’s own self descends and speaks. And we witness an amazing epiphany – God revealed: Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Son and Beloved by the Father, Jesus, Emmanuel, servant-king begins his mission. He begins as he will continue, standing in the muck amid sinners and seekers, among those. like us. who may wonder if God could possibly love them, if there is any real hope for something new, something more, something meaningful and steadfast.

In obedience, Jesus is moving out of a private life into a very public ministry. He is moving from a quieter life of faithful living toward a ministry that will place him amid the many needs and pain of the world, where he’s guaranteed to be hurt and to raise the wrath of the powerful and those who guard the status quo. I wonder how difficult it was for Jesus to make that step... to intentionally move from the comfort of the life he had known toward the uncertainties of unknown ministry? I think God knew we too would face similar choices and seasons throughout our lives and that’s one reason he lets us witness this very poignant moment in Jesus’ life. Each of us this day stands at the beginning of a new year, with all its unknowns. Whether you’re feeling eager to discover what invitations God may have for you this year or if you are wondering how you will ever make it through, Luke says, “Come sit on the Jordan. Put your baptismal story next to this one and hear that God speak to you, too.”

The Cotton Patch Gospel is a retelling of the life of Jesus as if in a modern day, rural Georgia. It was made into a musical theater production, complete with country music composed by the late Harry Chapin. One of the characters is “God” who sits on a ladder on the stage, overlooking the action... In an early scene the actor playing Jesus rises from his baptismal immersion and looks up to God with hope and a little bit of anxiety in his eyes. But God soon puts his worries at ease, with a voice that could be heard in the theater lobby, “You are my boy, Jesus. [I love you.] I am so proud of you!” Maybe we should haul a ladder into the church when we have a baptism because something similar happens between God and us in our own baptisms. As water and grace pour over our heads, the Lord exclaims: “This one is mine! I see my image in her! Don’t you see my resemblance in him? And here’s my Spirit to sustain and guide them as they go about doing my work.” We stop by the Jordan river each year at this time to see Jesus baptized and to be reminded --- we are God’s very own daughters and sons, that is who we are first and foremost, called by name and claimed forever by the grace and love of God who says, “Do you see that child of mine? I’m so proud of her. I’m so proud of him. Not perfect, but mine for always.”¹

And there’s something else we’re to remember as we come to the Jordan today. Like Jesus, our baptism not only confirms *whose* we are but also what we are to be about. We have been made part of God’s huge family and we’ve been commissioned into the family business of loving and redeeming the world and serving others in God’s name. Christianity is not a solo venture. We participate in a movement in which we need one another to continue Jesus’ saving work.

Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock tells of serving as pastor in a little community in southwest Oklahoma named Custer City. Its population was around 450 but it had four churches all about the same size. The attendance at each of them rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the crops.

But the best and most consistent attendance each Sunday in town was at the little café where all the pickup trucks were parked and most all of the men were inside discussing the weather and the cattle and the crops, while their wives and children were in one of the four churches. Once in a while one would be coerced by a wife or child to attend one of the churches but the “congregation” at the café remained biggest. They were not bad men. Indeed, they were good men, family men, hardworking men. The patron saint of the group at the café was Frank. Frank was in his seventies when Fred met him. He was a good, strong man, a pioneer, a rancher, a farmer, and a cattleman. He had been born in a sod house and he had prospered. “Ha!” the men at the café would say, “Old Frank will never go to church.”

One day Frank met Pastor Fred on the street, and he knew Fred was a preacher. But it was not Fred's custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so he just shook Frank's hand and visited with him. Then Frank took the offensive, "I work hard and I take care of my family and I mind my own business." That was his creed and as far as he was concerned, everything else is fluff. He was telling the pastor, "Leave me alone; I'm not a prospect."

So the pastor did not bother Frank. Which is why he, the church, the men at the café and the whole town were absolutely befuzzled when old Frank, 76 years old, presented himself one Sunday morning for baptism. Fred baptized him. Some thought Frank must be sick; he must be scared about meeting his maker. Some said "He must have heart trouble, going up to be baptized. I never thought old Frank would do that" There were all kinds of stories. But this is what Frank told the pastor the day after his baptism. Fred said, "Frank, do you remember that little saying you used to give me so much? 'I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business.'?"

He said, "Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot."

"Do you still say that?" Fred asked.

"Yes," Frank said.

"Then what's the difference?" Fred asked.

Frank answered, "I didn't know then what my business was."

Frank discovered what his business was. It was to serve God by caring for others and to be part of a community of Jesus' disciples who do just that.²

It's the business of everyone who God has called by name and claimed in love forever. We see that in Jesus. He left the waters of his baptism to go where God led him and to do what God called him to do — heal, teach, feed, invite, include, forgive, love. It's the calling of our baptism, too. But also remember Children of God, commissioned servants of love not only get parts in God's mission but also the Holy Spirit to empower us for our ministry work. On this day as we get up from our place on Jordan's banks, our baptized Lord calls to us from the other shore: "Trust your baptism — You are loved. You are God's! You are gifted and ready! You have what you need to live and be God's light. And if you don't, the Holy Spirit will be on it!" Grab on to your "belovedness, my brothers and sisters. Hold on to the Word, Meal and one another and what do you say we get up from this river bank and get on with our disciple business. "I have called you by name. You are mine. Do not fear, when you pass through the waters, I will be with you and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.... for I am with you," (*Is. 43: 2, 5a*) says the Lord.

Star of wonder, water of life -----

Word of God, Bread of light

mission leading, love proceeding
Guide us by thy perfect Light. Amen!

Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTES

1. Adapted from a portion of Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams' sermon, "God Believes in You." Day 1.org Jan. 10, 2010.

2. Fred B. Craddock, "Attending a Baptism," The Cherry Log Sermons Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, pp 11-12 (some parts paraphrased)