

*Baptism of Our Lord*

January 13, 2019

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 3: 15-22)

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 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, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

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 in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is a great day to remember your baptism. If you have been baptized, what do you remember? Have you been told about that day? Do you know when it was?

I know that I was baptized in March 1960, because my mother told me. I saw a picture once of the family leaving the church that day. Written on the back of it was, "Cindy's baptism." I don't know where that picture is anymore. And the church I was baptized in doesn't exist anymore. And the pastor who baptized me has died. So there is really no way to find out a lot more. No video, no certificate. And my memory, from the ripe old age of three months, is vague.

So I suspect for many here the memory of your baptism is sketchy. Even if you were older when you were baptized, it's such a busy day that how much do you remember? Which is why I like Luke's version of the baptism of Jesus. Take a look at it. Luke writes, "*When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized.*" That's it.

Nothing about how cold the river was. No description of the day, or the weather, or what Jesus was dressed in. It's in the third person – when he was baptized. John was arrested a paragraph before that. We're not even sure who baptized Jesus in Luke's Gospel. There is less about this actual baptism than there is about mine. Not even an old photo.

And perhaps that is how it should be. There is a mystery about baptism that we cannot capture on video. A depth to that moment that we can't preserve and put in the baby book.

Martin Luther was fascinated with baptism. He said in his Large Catechism,

“In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings.”

What you were wearing on that day is a lot less important than the God-infused waters that touched your life and changed it forever. What your baptism looked like is less important than what it did.

Luke is not concerned about the details of Jesus' baptism. He doesn't care. He is concerned with what happens after the baptism. He is more interested in the result of the baptism. So Luke doesn't describe this washing in the water. He talks about what happens next. What happens after the relatives have gone home, and your hair has dried, and you begin this life as a baptized child of God.

I propose that, when we remember our baptism, it's not about what happened on one day. Every remembering of baptism is reclaiming the promises God gave you. It is the inbreaking once more of God's astonishing realm of grace, all around you. It is, once again, reorienting your life away from “me” and toward the world and the neighbor. It's a way of saying, “I belong to God right now. And I will live as God's daughter or God's son.”

Luke cares a lot more about what Jesus does after his baptism. So let's look at that. After Jesus comes out of the water, muddy and wet, water squishing under his feet, what does he do? What is the first thing he does? Jesus prays. Jesus connects with this God in whose name he was baptized.

Prayer. One of the teens once said, “Oh, praying is easy, because I just don't do it.” And then I think we all feel that way sometimes. “I don't know what to say.” “I don't have time.” “I'm too tired.” “God doesn't answer prayer anyway, so what good is it?” “I don't know how.” God has become for some the giant vending machine or magical genie that we ask things of and nothing else.

But that's not the example that Jesus gives. Jesus doesn't just ask for stuff. Jesus prays.

As the crowds grow and his ministry gets bigger, he slips away often to pray. He prays all night before he chooses his disciples. He prays right after he tells his disciples that he is going to die. He prays during the transfiguration. He prays in the garden before his arrest. He tells the disciples to pray constantly. He says to pray that you won't fall into trial. This is more than asking for stuff. This is living life in partnership with God. Baptism connects Jesus to the Father. Prayer continues that partnership.

When we remember we are baptized, when we remember that we are touched and filled by this one that we cannot control, but who loves us beyond reason, then prayer becomes less coming to God with a list of things we want, and more coming to God, saying, "Can we talk about this thing that's going on with me right now?" Or coming to God and saying, "Speak, God, and I will listen."

When Jesus is baptized, the first thing he does is to pray. And while he is praying – not while he's in the water, but afterwards – while he is praying, "*the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.*" The Spirit comes.

Now, this is not a one off. This is not that the Spirit comes this one time to Jesus and never again in history. The Holy Spirit is referred to six hundred plus times in the Old and New Testaments. Joseph is given the power by the Spirit to interpret dreams. Bezalel was given skill by the Spirit to build the worship space. Judges, kings, prophets, are all given the power of the Spirit to do what needs to be done. The random people in Samaria are filled with the Spirit. We heard about that in today's reading. Always filled with the Spirit so they can do what needs to be done, when it needs to happen. Again and again, the Spirit comes to bring what is needed at the right time.

At baptism, we pray for the Spirit to come. The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of council and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the Spirit of joy in God's presence. We pray that we will always be filled with God's Spirit. Again and again, the Spirit will come to bring the skills and the courage to do what is needed in this world.

Can you imagine yourself filled with God's spirit? Imagine yourself, in-spirited, inspired, infused with the spirit of God, given what you need to live this Christian life? As we remember our baptism, we open ourselves to be infused with God's spirit of wisdom, and courage, and skill, and whatever is needed to be the people of God in the world.

Jesus is baptized. Then he prays. Then he is filled with the Holy Spirit. Then a voice comes from heaven, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"

But, what is God pleased about? Jesus has gotten wet and he has prayed. This is it. This is before any miracles, or any disciples are called, or any preaching is done. This is not about anything Jesus has done. It is who Jesus is. It is who we are. From the beginning.

God says what is already true. Jesus is God's son. You are a son or a daughter of God, no matter how you live, who you vote for, who you love, what you earn, what kind of grades you get. It just is. I'll repeat that. It just is.

Richard Rohr said, "We push against the river until we learn that, number one, there is a river, and, number two, we are in the middle of it. It's all around us."

"Beloved" is all around us. It is the water we swim in. And nothing can change that. To remember baptism is to claim that "I am beloved." It is to live the life of the beloved. It is living every day hearing that whispered in your ear: "Beloved. Beloved. Beloved." "You've got this, because I've got you."

Jesus is baptized – then he is filled with the spirit – then he prays, and he is filled with the spirit, and he is claimed as the beloved.

And then? What happens next is not in the reading this morning. In fact, by a quirk of the lectionary, we don't hear the next reading until March, in Lent, which is unfortunate because it is all one story. Jesus is baptized and prays. He is filled with the spirit. He is claimed as the beloved. Then he is led out into the wilderness. Luke writes,

*"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."*

The Gospel of Mark is even more urgent about it. He said, "*The Spirit drives him into the wilderness.*"

Jesus may be loved and claimed, but it doesn't mean it's going to be easy. It's not going to be easy for any of us to live the baptized life. God has work for us to do. Real work of changing lives. Real work of healing the world. Real work of loving as God loves. Every decision we make, every conversation we have, everything we try, can be a reflection of the baptism we live. There are forces in this world that defy God. There are forces that rebel against God. There are actions that pull us from God. There is always the temptation to put myself at the center of the universe. It is not easy to live this Christian life and follow the way of Jesus.

That is why we have baptism to remind us. It is why we are given prayer, and the power of the Spirit, and the word "Beloved" ringing in our ears, to keep us going.

As we live in remembrance of baptism, we become a force to bring goodness and wholeness into the world, because we are the baptized.

Amen.