

Sunday, January 9, 2022

First Sunday after the Epiphany: Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Year C)

Isaiah 43.1-7; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/651192002686576>

(Sermon begins at about 16:35)

“New Identity in Baptism”

On the Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany, we always celebrate the baptism of our Lord by John the Baptist. As you recall, we already talked about the nature of the baptism John was performing a little over a month ago on both the Second and Third Sundays of Advent. And while we didn't specifically talk about Jesus' baptism at the time, that act was certainly in the back of our minds and in the forefront of the purpose of the readings for those two Sundays.

Before we get to the specifics of Jesus' own baptism, there are a couple of things about the baptism that John was proclaiming that we need to touch on. First is the fact that Scripture clearly states that this was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Lk 3.3). The second, while related, is not specifically stated, but is, rather, contingent upon knowledge of Jewish sacramental and liturgical practices of the day. That, in those days, immersion in water was a rite “typically reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism, signifying the all-encompassing, fresh-start character of conversion.”¹

Today, we do focus on Jesus' baptism. And this invariably raises the question—spoken or unspoken—why did Jesus need to be baptized? We understand Jesus to be the Son of God, fully human and fully divine. That being the case, he could not have any sins that needed forgiving. And second, Jesus was most certainly Jewish, so did not need to be converted. No sins to be forgiven, no need to convert, so why did he go to John to be baptized?

There is one overarching reason, which breaks down into two pieces. The overarching reason? For us. He did it for us. Pure and simple. More specifically, the renowned master preacher Fred Craddock “once called attention to the extraordinary, stunning power of two little words in Luke's account.” Words that would be easy to gloss over. Verse 21 reads: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized . . .” Almost parenthetically, Luke says, “Jesus also.” A bunch of others were being baptized and Jesus just happened to be one of them. As one commentator notes, “‘Jesus also’ (Luke 3:21). It's an expression of the astonishing humility and solidarity of the Incarnation: in Jesus, God comes alongside us, even to the point of joining us in a rite of repentance and renewal.”² Just as God did not need to come among us in the flesh, but did so anyway out of love for us, so too did Jesus—God in the flesh—chose to participate in this life-changing rite of purification and renewal. Not because he needed the purification. Not because he needed the renewal. But because he wanted to demonstrate that he was “all in” when it came to his humanity. That he was not standing over us, but instead was walking side-by-side with us. Experiencing life just as we do. Not looking on from afar, but in the trenches with us.

That does not mean that his baptism was a sham. That it was merely for show. Because just as baptism has a transformative effect on those who undergo the rite, so too did Jesus' baptism have a profound effect on his life. Just not in the same way that it has for those of us in need of purification and renewal. Although, there certainly was an element of renewal for Jesus, as well. Which brings us to the second piece of why Jesus was baptized.

One thing that we do not see in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, but uniquely reflected in and revealed through a subsequent story is that Luke characterizes Jesus' baptism as an anointing for divine service, symbolized by the Holy Spirit descending upon him. Now, to be sure, the other three Gospels also report that after Jesus was baptized the Spirit descended upon him. But Luke carries that symbolism one step further. After his temptation in the wilderness and the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus makes a visit to his hometown of Nazareth. Again, a story that is also reflected in Matthew and Mark. But it is only in Luke's account that a crucial piece is included: the words that Jesus actually spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth. That he read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4.18). Quoting the words of the Prophet Isaiah, but essentially reframing them as being his mission statement when he follows up with "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4.21). Clearly stating what he intends to do through his ministry. And that he had specifically been anointed by God for this work. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Anointed by the Spirit at his baptism in the River Jordan. A preparation for the work that was to come. Engaging in and working toward God's plan for humanity to bring about salvation and liberation.

Our baptisms are no less significant. It is often easy to view baptism as an accomplishment. Something to be checked off. An ending point. Luke reminds us that when Jesus was baptized, when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Lk 3.22), that was just the beginning for Jesus. The beginning of his public ministry, changing his life, his purpose, to one completely focused on living out and fulfilling God's mission. A new focus. A new identity. Our baptism is our own beginning. Baptism is our transformation into becoming a member of the Body of Christ. A new focus. A new identity.

Now, there is a part of the description of this transformation that may seem a little scary, even off-putting. In describing baptism, John the Baptist says, "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" (Lk 3.16-17). This is one of those images that we tend to overlook. Perhaps because we don't want to think about the negative implications. That we don't want to think about the possibility of judgment. Particularly a judgment that entails unquenchable fire.

One commentator provides a beautiful explanation of what this graphic imagery actually means:

What should we make of John's remark that Jesus will come with "his winnowing fork in his hand"? Is this an image of including some but excluding others? On the contrary, the metaphor points in the other direction: every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers (even today) use wind to separate these husks—collectively known as "chaff"—from the grain itself, the goal being, of course, to save every grain, not to separate the good grain from the bad grain. This is a metaphor of preservation and sanctification, not division. Like an expert restoring a work of art, what the wind and fire remove are the impurities: the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that make us less generous, less fair, or less respectful of others. Each of us requires restoration, liberation from whatever "husks" are holding us back.³

This is not an image of judgment, of exclusion, of punishment. This is actually a beautiful example of how God through Christ seeks to save as many of us as possible. To help transform us into the fullness of who God created us to be. To help us in the shedding of our husks, revealing the rich kernels of grain that will ultimately grow and produce fruit for God's kingdom. Through the waters of baptism and the lifelong process of growing into the fullness of our calling as members of the Body of Christ, those qualities and characteristics that are less desirable, that get in the way of becoming who God created us to be, that obscure the beauty of who God knows us to be at our core, are gently removed. Just as the chaff is gently removed, leaving only the pure, good, life-nourishing kernels of grain. This is the promise of baptism. The promise that Jesus established through his own baptism, and the promise that has been given to each of us as we make our way to the font.

In our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah, God makes that same promise: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is 43.1). That promise was fulfilled through Jesus' own baptism, transforming him for his ministry, preparing him for his journey to the cross and beyond. A journey that provides for our own salvation and liberation.

Jesus' baptism and the journey that followed are an invitation for us. To be partners in his sacred work. Not that we have to go to the cross. He's taken care of that on our behalf. But we are invited into the sacred work of helping build the Kingdom of God here and now, through our lives and our ministries. Lives that are transformed and prepared through our own baptisms. The act of purification and renewal that sets each of us on our own unique journey, with its own unique work.

Through the sacrament of baptism, God says to each and every one of us, "I have called you by name; you are mine." And he follows up with "You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased." With that affirmation and proclamation of our God-given identity comes the unspoken command: go out and live into that identity as fully as you possibly can.

¹ "Jesus Also: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Jesus' Baptism," SALT, January 4, 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/7/jesus-also-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-two>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.