

He Will Baptize

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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."...

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."

In our scripture this morning we find at least four areas of interest that we will examine. First there was a case of mistaken identity. Second, Jesus identified with suffering humanity. Third, ministry starts with prayer, continues with prayer, is undergirded and sustained by prayer. And fourth, God changes our name and give us our ministry in our baptism.

As you are aware, this past week Leroy and I were on vacation and one things we normally do is watch movies that we had not had a the time to do in our busy lives. One movie that came on was "Superman Returns." I am always surprised that no one seems to be able to recognize the character when he is walking about being Clark Kent. We like them seem to be looking for a hero, but unable to recognize him when he is right under our nose. In our scripture John the Baptism was preaching and baptizing and people were asking if he was the hero that God had promised. Was he the one that would be the Messiah, the savior of the world? John made it clear that he was not the one, but God would indeed send one that would meet all their expectations! He would have the advantage of having the Holy Spirit that would indeed be able to bring salvation, power and judgment. Isn't it

interesting that many in the world are still looking for a hero, one to make life meaningful, but still looking in the wrong direction? Jesus came to earth over 2,000 years ago, and still there are those that don't recognize him as the savior of the world!

Many don't recognize Jesus because they don't realize that he was born from as well as into a world of systemic sin, and his baptism was 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. There are no innocent, no perfect, no unambiguous, no controllable, indeed no sinless, choices in this world. All choices must be made within a context of a system that precedes and impinges upon them. Jesus understood the world of the outcast to be the world in which he was to minister: the publicans; the unclean; the prostitutes; those whom the nice people in his society ignored and tried to forget. But for Jesus there was no ignoring, but an embracing of those that his society rejected.

According to Luke, all we know about the baptism of Jesus is that it was 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.

It is a question worth asking whether our churches truly identify with sinners and are willing to get in line with them, to welcome and work for

them as brothers and sisters in Christ. The church may say all the right words, declaring that we are hospitals for sinners and refuges for those who have lost their way, but too often we may send the message that respectable, successful folks are the ones we need to build up our communities. Time and again people who encounter difficulties in life drop out of our churches, seek help from other caregivers, and return to church only after they feel they can be recertified as respectable, churchgoing people. Jesus got in line with sinners and was baptized with them. That might be worth knowing and remembering. As the church he must follow his example. Our doors must be open to all who seek a savior.

One scholar put it this way: the sorry world of the crack house... had seemed so distant from my world as the academic dean of a theological seminary. But in truth, that "other" world was only a few miles from my home. Where did that world start, and where did it stop? "My" world was geographically close, but had I ever intentionally done anything at all to touch the lives in that "other" world? Was I only involved to judge its inhabitants? Or was there not a sense in which I was a participant in that world as well as mine, even if that participation were as an absentee neighbor? (Carol Lakey Hess)

Did you notice that Luke does not have Jesus say a single word out loud at his baptism, but after he is baptized, Jesus prayed? Jesus did not only come to us sinners; he came to God in prayer. He did not undertake his public ministry of teaching and healing in his own power and abilities. The source of his strength was beyond himself. The Holy Spirit encouraged him all the way, even when the way becomes difficult. The disciples learned this posture of prayer from Jesus, as the Spirit will gave them the stamina and patience to love and love again in faithful ministry.

Again, it is worth asking whether our church depend upon the Holy Spirit and our connection to God in prayer for the spiritual stamina to go into the world and make a difference in people's lives through Christ. This connection remains the lifeline of every disciple, every congregation, and every ministry. It is significant that this intensely spiritual experience following Jesus' baptism happened while he is in the posture of prayer. James Weldon Johnson prayed that the church will never forget how to bend toward God for its strength:

O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before thy throne of grace.
O Lord, this morning
Bow our hearts beneath our knees
And our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning
Like empty pitchers to a fountain full.

Identifying with sinners in the waters of baptism and holding onto God in prayer, Jesus then was claimed as God's Son. As Clarence Jordan renders it: the sky split, the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove came down upon him, and a voice came from the sky saying, "You are my dear Son; I'm proud of you." At his baptism, Jesus was ordained as Messiah by a God who loves him and told him so. This powerful affirmation, this calling from God, sustained Jesus through a time of temptations in the desert and then through the joys and trials of faithful ministry.

But it is again worth asking whether the church is sustained by knowing that God claims us as his children and is proud of us for bringing God's love to all people. John Leith, a Presbyterian professor and theologian, liked to say that every human life is rooted in the will and intention of God: "In baptism the person's name is called because our faith is that God thought of this person before they were, that God gave to this person 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 the intention of the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth."

We need to hear this affirmation from God, and we need to hear it from each other. These are life-giving words that every human being upon this earth should hear: "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." When Jesus heard those words, they changed his life forever. They will do the same for our children, our neighbors, our spouses, our church members, and, Jesus promised, even our enemies.

Luke uses very few words to share with us the baptism of our Lord. But those few words lead us to very deep wellsprings of joy in the faithful ministry. To identify with all people, to depend upon God in prayer for the strength to live and to love, and to hear the affirmation of your God as the source of your calling and purpose in life are the most enduring joys of life. These are the blessings of our life together in Christ as the church. (Robert M. Brearley). These are the blessings we share because of our baptism into Christ.

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