

January 16, 2022

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

By Water and Word: Our Call to Discipleship

Throughout the Advent season, the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus were intertwined. We heard the story of how the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth, although advanced in years, was to give birth to one who would make the way for the Savior who was to follow. We saw this child of Zechariah leap in mother Elizabeth's womb when she opened her arms and home to Mary, as Elizabeth recognizes that the mother of her Lord has come to her. This morning the stories of John and Jesus continue to be intertwined as we meet them in adulthood, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and crowds came to be baptized. We pick up the story of John's ministry in Luke chapter 3, beginning with verse 15.

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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."

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." This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Last week we celebrated the Feast of the Three Kings or the Feast of Epiphany, and as we look around the sanctuary, the vestiges of Advent and Christmas are gone, packed up safely until the end of next November when they will return in all of their glory. This morning we celebrate what the Orthodox church refers to as the Feast of the Theophany.

Both "epiphany" and "theophany" are words that relate to an appearance of the divine in a sudden, revelatory way. "Theophany," refers specifically to a divine **self**-revelation to humankind. In our passage this morning from the Gospel of Luke we have a theophany of the Triune God. As author and educator Allison Backous Troy relates, "we see the Trinity revealed to all creation: the Father, speaking from a cloud of light, and the dove of the Holy Spirit, descending on Christ. He (Christ) is King of Creation, the maker of water and light and life itself; as he steps down into the waters, he comes up fully revealed as who he is..."¹

Jesus Christ is revealed as who he is, and the person of Jesus Christ and the work of Jesus Christ are now fully enmeshed. Jesus ministry of teaching and healing, of feeding and

¹ <https://faithandleadership.com/turning-the-waters-christs-baptism>

forgiving will now begin. And we also have revealed – or foreshadowed what is ahead for Christ. As Troy shares, “Christ descends into the water to accept what John the Baptist is afraid to give him — because baptism is also associated with death. When Christ goes down into the Jordan, we also see him going down into our own pits of sadness, despair and unresolved pain. And when he ascends — when he emerges from the Jordan — we get an echo of what he does at Pascha (Easter), his light illuminating the furthest reaches of our suffering.”²

Troy ends her essay by reflecting on the deeply personal aspects of baptism, saying, “I think I share in the fear that the waters of the Jordan had in encountering Christ. It is a deep, guttural kind of fear: What could Christ love about me? About the world I do so little to protect?... The depths of our own suffering, no matter what, are not too deep for Christ to step into. We will, in some way, be able to drink deeply of that luminous water and be renewed, illumined and loved.”

Friends, baptism is deeply personal. We hear the promises of that personal connection to God in the words from the prophet Isaiah that Emily shared in our Old Testament reading:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

In the Presbyterian Church, we celebrate two sacraments: baptism and communion. These sacred acts were performed by Jesus in his ministry and Jesus called his disciples to minister through them. The PC(USA) Directory for Worship found in our Book of Order³ says it so beautifully: "The Sacraments are both physical signs and spiritual gifts, including words and actions, surrounded by prayer, in the context of the Church's common worship. They employ ordinary things — the basic elements of water, bread, and wine — in proclaiming the extraordinary love of God."

While the nature of the water we use in baptism may be ordinary, the waters of baptism are rich in meaning. From the creation stories in Genesis – the beginning of scripture to the river running through the New Jerusalem in Revelation, the final book of the Bible; from the gardens fed by wells and the springs that never run dry to the Living Water offered by Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel of John, water brings the promise of new life, of abundant life, making a new creation possible.

And that experience of the personal baptism doesn't only happen to us in the moments we are baptized. The waters of baptism can renew us throughout our lives, at times and places when we need God's assurance of love. I think back on times in my own life when the waters of baptism became personal for me. Yes - baptism is deeply personal AND yet baptism is also deeply communal.

² <https://faithandleadership.com/turning-the-waters-christs-baptism>

³ *PC(USA) Book of Order*, 2019-2023 W-3.0401 Theology of the Sacraments

The cleansing waters, the new creation are not just for us as individuals, but also for us as community of believers, for the living water can cleanse society of our communal sins, cleanse us of injustice and hypocrisy.

I think about the scripture Martin Luther King spoke in his “I Have a Dream” speech and often quoted in other speeches, from the prophet Amos, words which warns of coming judgment for a disobedient nation: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”⁴

Writer, teacher and Quaker pastor Micah Bales comments that we should not take these words from Amos in isolation, not be content with the lyrical poetry. We must consider the verses that precede them when the Lord is speaking through Amos to the people of Israel. It was a time when there was relative peace and prosperity, but also a time when the people were neglecting God’s law, and there was a big and growing disparity between the very rich and those living in poverty. And it was a time when the religious leaders and people made big productions out of worshipping the Lord, and yet were not caring for their neighbor. You can see why Martin Luther King Jr. might have resonated with the prophet Amos. The Lord told Amos to tell the people of Israel:

“I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Micah Bales posits that “King wasn’t interested in symbolic victories... He was well aware of the human tendency to put on a big show in order to cover up our own lack of righteous living. King knew that God hates holidays without humility, songs without sincerity. He would know that in a country where black lives still do not seem to matter to most of us, where millions of African Americans are imprisoned or branded as felons, that any celebration of civil rights victory is premature. If King were here to celebrate his holiday with us, he would ask us to show him justice, not statues; changed hearts, not new names on freeways.”⁵

I find these words from Pastor Bale as challenging as I find the words from the prophet Amos. And I also find in them a source of hope, especially on a Sunday when we reaffirm our baptismal vows.

We recognize that the waters of baptism - water that nourishes all life is a sign, a mark that we belong to God and we are freed from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. In the baptism vows we affirmed this morning, we not only acknowledged Jesus Christ as our Lord Savior, we also promised to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. To turn away from the sins that separate us from each other and prevent us from being the beloved community that Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed about. In our baptismal vows we also promise to be Christ’s faithful disciple,

⁴ Amos 5:24

⁵ Micah Bales. *Martin Luther King Isn’t Interested in Your Praise*. Sojourner Magazine, 2016. Published online at <https://sojo.net/articles/martin-luther-king-isn-t-interested-your-praise>

obeying his word and showing his love. Our call to discipleship stems from our baptismal vows.

By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the Body of Christ, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice when we are baptized. And this changes everything. You see like so much of our faith, baptism is God reaching out to us, using the common elements of our lives to tell of God's extraordinary love for us. And we respond to that love by our words and our actions.

The biblical story from creation to revelation is future-oriented: God will complete what God began. For Christians, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are signs and guarantees of God's promise. They are assurances that God remains faithful to God's redemptive purpose and plan. And yet we live in a world that is broken, with bodies that decay, with relationships that splinter, and with reminders of how sin separates us from God and each other. Whether our own baptism was many years ago or more recent, whether we remember it in full detail or only know it through stories others have told of it, we must take seriously our baptismal vows to be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying his word and showing his love. May it be so. Join me in prayer...