

January 12, 2025

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Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

Who is Jesus? One Who is Baptized

Before I read our scripture for this morning, I'd like to share a bit about where we have been and where we are headed. Throughout the season of Advent and Christmas, we have been in mostly in the Gospel of Luke hearing the narrative of Jesus' birth and childhood. We took a dip into the Gospel of Matthew last week for Epiphany Sunday. Throughout out these narratives Jesus has been identified through words spoken by messengers of God – some angels, some people.

We have heard that his cousin John will be called to make the way ready for him, the one who is the Lord. We have heard that Jesus "will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." The angels and shepherds shared that this one born in Bethlehem is the Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. The magi came and paid homage to this one who would be king, a ruler who is to shepherd the people. We have heard that this child will bring down brought the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.

When Jesus was presented in the temple for the rites of purification, these identities of Jesus' were affirmed by Simeon and Anna (in a passage we didn't hear this year), with Jesus hailed as a light for revelation to the gentiles and the one who would redeem Israel. On the last Sunday in December, we heard Jonathan Townley share the only passage of Jesus' childhood we have in scripture. When Jesus' family had traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, Jesus did not return home with them. When his parents finally located him, he responded to their query "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Chapter two of the Gospel of Luke ends with these words: And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.

So here we are... fast forwarding a number of years to Jesus adulthood and the beginning of his ministry. Who is this Jesus? Over the next eight weeks we explore the person and work of Jesus, beginning with his baptism this morning. On these Sundays we catch a glimpse of the divine, yet also very human Christ.

To set the stage, we are the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee. At this time, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah. John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Hear now these words from Luke chapter 3 beginning with verses 15-17 and then continuing with verses 21-22

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 strap 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." **The Word of God for the people of God.**
Thanks be to God.

And so we begin Jesus' ministry. "*You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.*" Jesus' call to ministry did not entail a long list of credentials he needed to obtain; no ordination exams to pass; no forms to fill out or training classes. It was the work of the Holy Spirit and the recognition that he was a beloved child of God. I wonder how many times in his life, especially during his three years of ministry, on days when the weariness seeped into his bones, when the crowds were pressing in on him for just one more healing, when the religious leaders and political officials were questioning and reproaching him, criticizing him for welcoming those on the margins of society, eating with those whom polite society says you don't eat with. I wonder how many days Jesus was so weary that he looked back at his baptism in the Jordan River remembering the words from his Father: "*You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.*"

I imagine that when Jesus heard these words, his thoughts went to the prophet Isaiah and the beautiful words Rebecca shared a few minutes ago:

But now thus says the Lord, the one who created you Jacob and you Israel.
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.
For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.

The Reformed tradition understands baptism to be a sign of God's covenant. The water of baptism is linked with the waters of creation, the flood, and the exodus. Baptism connects us with God's creative purpose, cleansing power, and redemptive promise from generation to generation. Baptism also represents God's call to justice and righteousness, rolling down like a mighty stream.

While there are a number of meanings of baptism in the reformed tradition (shameless plug for the Adult Ed time this morning where I will share more on this), there are two that I want to highlight this morning. The first is our call to justice and righteousness, rolling down like a mighty stream, to quote the prophet Amos.

In his book *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, liturgical scholar Dr. James F. White writes that “baptism conveys a sense of absolute equality ... baptism is then the basis of Christian democracy and a such our most fertile soil for ecumenism. All Christians come forth from the waters of baptism in the same spiritual condition. As Paul insisted in baptism there are no Jews nor Greeks nor slaves nor free nor male nor female. And, we might add, no rich or poor, no communists or capitalists. Baptism forms a common base level.” White shares that in the days of the civil rights movement, it was common to refer to baptism as the “sacrament of integration.”¹

I was particularly struck by this comment about baptism of as the “sacrament of integration” after reading Dr. William Yoo’s book *A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* (shameless plug number 2 – I will be leading a study on this book beginning Tuesday night on Zoom). Yoo writes in great detail how the understanding of baptism was distorted and corrupted by Christians to justify enslavement of people. It was not just slave holders, but also church leaders, Biblical scholars, and leading theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who argued that the mandate we hear in the Gospel of Matthew to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” did not equate to equality for those who are baptized. There were legal challenges in England and in the American colonies which led to judgements stating that baptism into Christianity would not lead to emancipation.²

The practice that developed of seeing those enslaved who were baptized as somehow less worthy, less of a sibling in Christ than those who enslaved them is antithetical to the message of Jesus in his own baptism. Luke tells us, “Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus **also** had been baptized and was praying...” All the people were baptized along with Jesus. Now sometimes the imagery accompany the baptism of Jesus makes it seem like he and John the Baptist were alone in the River Jordan when the heavens opened and the dove descended. Luke makes it clear that was not the case. Jesus was baptized in community. As one scholar has noted, Jesus communal baptism “is 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. ...God walks — and washes — with sinners! “Jesus also” is baptized, and so calls us to follow him on a path of unassuming generosity, never looking down our noses at anyone, and always gladly embracing the Spirit’s

¹ James F. White *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*. Abingdon Press, 1999; p71

² William Yoo. *A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church*. Westminster John Knox, 2022, p41-43.

sanctifying, restoring, empowering renewal. For each one of us, along with everyone we meet, is a beloved child of God.”³

From its earliest days, followers of Christ were baptized into a fellowship or “koinonia” in the Greek. They formed a “communion of believers” with the Holy Spirit binding them together. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown shares that “we have little evidence in early Christian missionary endeavor of people being free to say, “I now believe in Jesus,” and then walking off on their own. Rather they are made part of a community.” This has been the pattern throughout history, really until recently when there has been more of a movement toward a personal relationship with Jesus. Brown says, “Today, as all know, there are doctrinal divisions among Christian churches. Yet there may be a more fundamental division, namely, between those who think “church” is important, and those for whom Christianity is really a matter of “Jesus and me,” without any concept of being saved as part of a people or church.”⁴

For those of us in the reformed tradition, one of the essential meanings of baptism is marking ourselves as part of something bigger than our own individual journey. We are here at PCO are a community of beloved children of God. We are baptized **into** this community. We are baptized **within** this community. We are baptized **to become** community. This is why we are here on Sunday mornings – in person or online – we are here because community matters. We are here to be in the presence of God and be present with one another, our families, old friends, and friends we don’t yet know. This is what the church throughout the ages has taught us. This is what Jesus taught us at his baptism. Who then is Jesus Christ at his baptism and the beginning of his ministry? He is the beloved son of God. Just as each one of us is a beloved child of God.

This morning as part of our worship service we are reaffirming the promises of our own baptism and the baptism of others in the family of faith. 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 celebrate and reaffirm that we have been marked, sealed, and named as beloved children of the covenant. May it be so. Join me in prayer...

³ Salt Project. Jesus Also: SALT’s Commentary for Jesus’ Baptism. January 7, 2025. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/7/jesus-also-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-two>

⁴ Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Doubleday, 1996. p329