

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
Baptism of the Lord
Sunday, January 12, 2025
Scripture: Luke 3: 15-22
Sermon: The Start of Something Big

In the season of Epiphany we look at those special events in Jesus' life where his presence was especially manifested with power. Jesus' baptism is one of those epiphanies. You heard Luke's version read this morning. The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." In newer translations, the adjective "beloved" is made a separate phrase to emphasize the intensity of the personal nature of this experience. "You are my Son. My beloved. In you I am well pleased."

That is Luke's version. All four gospels portray this scene. But Luke's version is a little different than the others. In each version, though, the Spirit descends "like a dove." Luke and the other apostles use the dove as a metaphor for the Spirit's coming into our lives. It is a beautiful metaphor. Have you ever seen a dove descend and land? It is graceful, gentle, and quiet. That's the point being made. That is the way the Holy Spirit will enter into our lives. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus gently, quietly, and in Luke's version, privately.

That is why Luke is different from the other three gospels. The other writers imply that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, apparently when he was still in the water. That is the way this scene is often portrayed in religious art, especially those beautiful paintings out of the Middle Ages. Jesus, standing waist deep in water. John the Baptist standing next to him, pointing at Jesus, as if to say, "This is the one!" or, in the words of the Gospel of John, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!*" Above Jesus' head in these scenes is the Spirit, as a dove, descending. It is like the symbol that we see in many churches and baptismal fonts. That's the way all the other gospels picture it. But Luke is different. He says, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the Holy Spirit

descended upon him." Which means that the Epiphany, this special presence of God in this event, came to Jesus when he was by himself, praying. It wasn't a public event. It was a personal and private experience. No one else saw it. He came out of the water, went off by himself, and prayed. That is when it happened.

Think of what a powerful moment this day would have been for Jesus – the day that he was baptized by John in the River Jordan. Jesus grew up with the weight of the world on his shoulders, whether he always knew it or not.

When he was conceived, the angel Gabriel told his mother, Mary, that he would be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. The shepherds had reported a similar message, that Jesus would be the Messiah, the Lord. Joseph, too, was visited by an angel in a dream to receive this wondrous news. The magi, the wise men from the east, had followed a star, and upon finding Jesus, had knelt down and paid him homage. King Herod had ordered all infants in Bethlehem to be killed, in the dark hope that the would-be king would be among those killed. Joseph and Mary had escaped to Egypt and returned to Nazareth after the death of Herod. Jesus grew up in that small town of Nazareth, probably being apprenticed as a carpenter, like Joseph. But with those closest to him knowing that there was something different about him, that God had a unique path for Jesus to walk. And now, finally, in his thirtieth year, Jesus has begun taking that path. He has journeyed to the River Jordan to be baptized by his relative John.

John has been preparing the way, telling the crowds that came to be baptized that another was coming more powerful than he. And that he, John, was not even worthy to untie the thong of this one's sandals. And then, Jesus was there, ready to begin his public ministry. Ready to be baptized by John. What a powerful moment this was, for Jesus, for John, and for all who were present.

But what does it all mean, that Jesus was baptized? And what does it mean that we are baptized? Today is a good day to think about this, and to remind ourselves of what all these baptisms mean for us all.

First, think about what Jesus' baptism meant for him. We believe Jesus to be fully divine and fully human, and the meaning of his baptism is connected to both of these beliefs. First, because Jesus is fully divine, the

Son of God, perfect and without sin, he did not need to be baptized. Instead, he chose to be baptized. He chose to become one of us, fully and completely. Taking on our sin, and the sin of the world.

Looking at his baptism in this way reminds me of the story of Father Damien. Father Damien was a Catholic missionary to Hawaii back in the 1800's, and was one of the few willing to go to the leper colony there. Dwayne and I actually visited this leper colony on our Honeymoon on the island of Molakai. We hiked down about 2000 feet to Kalapapa, the colony, and learned about Father Damien. He spent a lot of time in that colony, helping to build a church, teaching the faith, but also dressing the residents' wounds, and providing for their physical as well as emotional and spiritual needs. After about eleven years of such care, Father Damien contracted leprosy, now known as Hansen's disease, himself. Father Damien changed his standard greeting on Sundays from "My fellow brethren" to "My fellow lepers." He had truly become one of them.

And isn't that what Jesus did for us, in his baptism? As the Son of God, he was baptized to truly become one of us, to share our pain, our suffering, and even our death. So that the Son of God could say to us, "My fellow humans."

Jesus' baptism is important because it shows us how far he will go to identify with us. But his baptism is also important for another reason, and that has to do with Jesus being fully human. As a human being, the task that lay before Jesus was a terribly difficult one. He was going to be opposed by many, and eventually be killed. None of it would be easy. Which is why his baptism provided such an important and necessary foundation.

Before Jesus began his public ministry, he was baptized. And as he was, he heard a voice from heaven say to him: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" And then, and only then, Jesus began his public work on this earth.

Jesus began all of this work only after being given this very special message from God. A message that gave him the courage to say no to the devil, to preach a bold word in the synagogues, to call disciples to follow him. A message that gave him the courage to cleanse the Temple. And a message that gave him the courage to promise Paradise to a repentant thief, while he himself was dying on a cross. What a powerful message and

foundation this would be for Jesus in his humanity, that he was God's beloved.

It was a rock foundation that gave him the courage and strength to do whatever was needed, whatever his heavenly Father desired. Because he was God's beloved Son.

Jesus was and is fully human and fully divine. As the Son of God, Jesus was baptized to become one with us. As the Son of Mary, he was baptized to be reminded that he is one with God, that he is God's beloved Son.

But you might ask, what does all of this have to do with us? In a word, everything. Because when we were baptized into Christ, his baptism became ours. Because Jesus became one with us in his baptism, we become one with him through ours. It's a remarkable truth that can, and should, change the course of our lives. That we are united with Jesus in baptism. We are one with him. And because of that, we are now God's beloved children, with whom God is well pleased.

Just as this message gave Jesus the courage to do his work, no matter the cost, so it can do for us. These words can give us the courage to live our lives for Jesus, and, if necessary, to give our lives for him. This message, that we are God's beloved, can provide us a rock foundation that no storm in this life can crack. What challenge, after all, is too great to face when we truly believe that we are God's beloved?

We all doubt God's love for us at times. Because of something we have done, perhaps. Or because of something that has happened in our life. We doubt or forget this basic truth of our lives.

Martin Luther made this a centerpiece of his spiritual practice: To remind himself of his baptism. To remind himself that he is God's beloved. Every morning, he would begin his day by remembering his baptism into Christ. Whenever he faced a challenge in his life, he would remind himself again of his baptism. Whenever he prayed, he would make the sign of the cross, and by doing so would remember his baptism.

Remembering his baptism, remembering that he was God's beloved, was a way for Luther to "reboot" his spiritual life, to start it over again, to come back to the basic truth that gave him the courage to face the challenges of his life: Challenges that included trials and persecutions,

repeated threats to his life; and on a personal level, the death of two of his six children.

When Martin Luther faced despair, he would come back to the fundamental truth of his life, that he was a baptized child of God, that he was God's beloved. And Luther taught us to do the same. To remind ourselves, every morning, and every day, that we are baptized, that we are God's beloved. No matter what.

Henri Nouwen, one of my favorite Christian writers, wrote an entire book on this very theme. It is entitled "*Life of the Beloved.*" Nouwen was asked by a friend of his, a secular journalist, to explain the spiritual life in a simple way, without theology and technical language. So, Nouwen did. And in its opening chapter, Nouwen wrote that "*All I want to say to you is, 'You are the Beloved.'*"

All of God's children are beloved and that means everyone, doesn't it? Jesus certainly thought so. He treated everyone as God's beloved. And he taught us, and even commanded us, to do the same. All of God's children are beloved by God. But many have forgotten it. Or have never been told it. And learning it, or remembering it, might be the most important thing that can happen in their life. So sharing it should be the most important thing that we do.

We are God's beloved. Because of Jesus. This should comfort us. And inspire us. To share this message with the world, just as Jesus taught us to do. The voice that Jesus heard from heaven is now spoken through those who follow him. And there are many in our world who may not hear this beloved word, unless they hear it from us. So let us be faithful in sharing this message, with all of God's beloved children.

To know you are God's beloved is the start of something big for your life is changed forever.