

Triune Chapel: January 13, 2019

Growing Pains: Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Standing in this pulpit after Deb's weekly incredible sermons is a bit like me trying to sing a solo after David or Carrie have sung! Well, that would be impossible. This is daunting but we will go on with a prayer that the Holy Spirit has taken the lead in my study of the Scripture and will take the lead in my effort to bring it to you!

Today in the Christian church calendar is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, and shortly we will join church-goers all over the world in reading the brief story of that event as told in the Gospel of Luke. The gist of the story is that Jesus came to John, the one whom we have come to call the "Baptist," for immersion in the Jordan River. This happened at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry. We can thus assume that he was about 30 years old, fully an adult, at the time of his baptism.

This timing may strike us 21st century Christians as a bit late for a baptism. Ours tend to occur in infancy or childhood. There are reasons for this, but we might wonder whether our baptism ritual has taken on a different focus and understanding from that of John the Baptist and Jesus. Might revisiting the story of Jesus's baptism help us in our own journeys to a closer relationship with God?

At least I have begun to think that the story of the baptism of the Lord, contained in all four Gospels, may be something we'd best not just skip past too easily-- as simply a curtain going up on the first act of Jesus's ministry, or now, as just a beautiful ritual celebrating that moment.

As always we are invited into the Scripture to find its living and ongoing meaning for our day. May we today wade into the

Jordan River with Jesus to discover what his act of faith has to teach us about him and about us.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 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.

3:17 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."

3:21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,

3:22 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."

Now I don't know about you, but I am left with some perplexing questions about this particular story about Jesus:

I am wondering...

Why the "old" age of thirty for this baptism?

Why before Jesus began his ministry?

Why a baptism of repentance? What did Jesus have to repent?

Why a baptism for Jesus at all? Shouldn't Jesus be the one baptizing?

The current Christian tradition in which baptism generally occurs in infancy or childhood, draws on a belief from the early church that baptism would guarantee eternal life. This was especially reassuring to parents whose infants and children were dying of infectious diseases. Thus, baptism by a priest came to be viewed as a mystical, almost magical, protective ritual. We can and do still draw comfort from that mystical sense of belonging fully to God from the moment of our baptism forward into eternity.

But Jesus at the time of his baptism was neither a vulnerable baby nor someone hoping to defeat death. He was a healthy adult, ready to get on with his life, sensing he had reached a pivotal turning point. John's call for repentance-- or literally for turning around from the comforts of the past to the challenges of the future-- must have felt like a confirming invitation to Jesus-- that his time had come--was now.

It hardly seems that this baptism was an insurance policy for eternal life. Rather, it seems that this baptism was the culmination of Jesus's dedicated, full-hearted, open-minded search for a deeper and more personal relationship with God throughout his life to that point. And in that baptismal moment, Jesus and those around him came to understand that searching for and being found by God are one and the same. "This one," God said, "is my beloved."

If the baptism of Jesus is meant to speak to us too, then maybe we shouldn't just leave it as a celebratory or protective rite of passage. Never mind whether we have been officially baptized or not, maybe this account of the baptism of the Lord troubles the waters of our lives, asking us whether we really want and are ready to be found by God. If not, we can settle back into our

comfortable, warm, dry (maybe very arid) lives and judge those who choose differently.

I do think the timing of Jesus's baptism is important. Jesus didn't walk into those waters until he was good and ready. Readiness to receive God into our very being isn't a trivial matter. Jesus did his homework. Have we?

What homework? How can we prepare to receive God fully and without fear as Jesus did at his baptism?

It is said that Jesus grew in wisdom, stature and favor with God and all people. Jesus grew into readiness to receive God. How so? What is there for us to learn here? Jesus grew towards God, first of all, by simply living life. Little is known about Jesus's childhood, but we can be sure that he had the inevitable life experiences of a child growing to maturity, the ups and the downs, the growing pains that teach all of us about life and its truths, the painful and joyful experiences that help create compassion and empathy (or sometimes anger and alienation). Life is our first and most direct teacher. God is there, waiting for us to have eyes to see and ears to hear.

We also know that Jesus lived an ordinary life among his people, working alongside relatives and friends, and keeping the Jewish laws and traditions with his family. And we know that Jesus, along with his people, was limited by a host of unpleasant and difficult external circumstances arising out of being contained within a power-hungry Roman Empire.

Jesus leaned into his calling by living life in the messy middle of the real world. That's where we live too. But are we alert enough to see what there for us to learn about ourselves and God? Or do we get stuck in the mess, find something or someone to blame, and lose touch with God's will in the chaos? If we live only in the real world, we can easily get lost. We need other touchstones of

truth. Jesus found his touchstone in the Holy Scripture. A hint: Maybe we can too!

We know that Jesus could and did read the Hebrew Scripture—especially the prophets like Isaiah—and he had lots of questions for the rabbis. His life experiences undoubtedly raised many real and practical questions about God and faithfulness as do ours.

Jesus was not afraid to pose those questions as he searched the Scripture for answers, nor was he afraid to question the religious authorities. As he studied God’s written word, he learned to look for answers beyond the obvious, in the lines, but also between the lines, using his imagination as well as his knowledge and wisdom. We know this from his teachings that often surprised the authorities with new insights.

Are we that brave? Or do we settle for answers already given by or for someone else, somewhere else? Jesus didn’t settle for easy answers or secondhand authorities—although, and this is crucial, he did listen carefully to the wise ones and carefully collected the gold nuggets of the Scripture and traditions of his people to sustain and guide him.

So, in preparation for his baptism, we can believe that Jesus lived life wide awake. Moreover, he brought the questions of life to Scripture and brought the Scripture to life for further examination and guidance. Jesus traveled through Scripture to find God’s will and to discover God’s love. Maybe we could do that too?

But I think that it must have been prayer and personal commitment that finalized preparation for the intimate relationship of Jesus and the Holy Spirit of God. Like Jesus, we can live with intention and we too can study the Scripture for guidance. But how are we doing on this third path to

relationship with God--being passionately present to God? Are our prayers real or rote? Is our commitment a matter of words or action? Are we wide open to God or only a little?

As you can probably tell, I used my own imagination with the Scripture for today to see Jesus, a man of 30, wading in the water. “What in the world is up with that,” I found myself asking. Making it real brought the message closer to home for me. Here Jesus is being himself, even as he is our resurrected Christ—with so much to teach us by providing us with a portrait of his own humanity. And it is as himself that he is claimed by God as beloved. As himself. As myself, can I too be called beloved of God. Yes, but I think God is waiting for me to do the homework, and I probably don’t have 30 years to do it!

A bit of an aside—

In thinking about the reality of the youth Jesus while studying for this sermon, I was reminded of a comedy routine performed by Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner called the “2000 Year-old Man.” Some of you may know it. In the routine, Reiner interviews Mel Brooks who is playing the role of a man who has lived for 2000 years (the routine was developed before our year 2000 so back in the day of Jesus). The 2000 year-old man is asked about various historical characters that he may have met or known. At one point, the interviewer asks, “Did you ever meet Jesus?” “Oh, yes,” the 2000-year-old man responds. “He was a quiet lad. Came in the store all the time. Never bought anything.” “Did you know he was the Lord?” the interviewer asks. “No,” the 2000 year-old man answers, “But if I had known that, I would have made him a partner!”

Wouldn’t we all like to make Jesus our partner? Maybe then we wouldn’t hesitate to explore the hard questions with him. In the tradition of the rabbis, surely he would encourage us to have deep, maybe even heated, discussions about Biblical texts,

digging for not- so- obvious meanings, ideas, inspirations and interpretations.

Jesus was immersed in the faith before he was immersed in the water! He was soaked with thoughts of and desire for communion with God. He was drenched with curiosity and open-heartedness, eager for more and more connection with his divine source. His immersion in the river Jordan was the culmination of all the growing pain immersions of his life to that point. We each have our own growing pains to consider and learn from as we remember our personal journeys to God. Recalling our baptism may help us reflect on where we have been and where we are going.

Jesus knew the promise of God given through the prophet Isaiah as a source of comfort in the painful times of personal and societal change and growth. Hear now those words of assurance:

Isaiah 43:1-7

43:1 ...thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

43:2 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... 43:3 For I am the LORD your God

We don't have to be afraid to grow, to invite the holy revelations that God may send us hidden in a parable, buried between the lines of a Bible verse, peeking out of a bird's nest, challenging us in times of prosperity and in times of chaos and despair. For the message is always there that we are named and loved by the One who will pass through rough waters and smooth--WITH US.

The baptism of our Lord is so much more than a simple ritual that we imitate in remembrance. It is a call for us to grow up in

the faith—not to settle too easily into the repetition of rites and words, but to reach out for a full life in Christ with all its growing pains of paying attention and being open to the dove of heaven whenever and wherever it may descend on us. Jesus’s baptism can lead us to be adults in the faith—to grow spiritually until we are absolutely immersed in the holy and living water of God.

**With the churches around the world today, on this the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, I call on us to “remember our baptism.” No matter when, or even if, you have actually been baptized, you can remember the baptism of the Lord that asks us to become adult Christians alongside Jesus. It teaches us to look for the improbable and engage the impossible, for holy revelation awaits us everywhere. We can be confident that when we walk through those mysterious waters, we will not be overwhelmed. God, our beloved, will be with us—always has been!
Amen**