

Baptism, Why Bother?: *Luke 3:15-23a*

Norwalk Christian Church, January 10, 2016, Year C, Epiphany, Baptism of Our Lord

Do you remember your baptism? It's a strange question for some, I guess. While our particular tribe of the Christian tradition baptises adults through immersion--fully submerging someone in a tub of water--we also welcome and affirm all baptisms centered on Christ. That means if you were baptized as a child, we don't make you redo that. Actually, we're Disciples--we don't make you do anything!

So, when I ask, "Do you remember your baptism?" it might be a hard for some, because, well, you were a baby. And for others, maybe you weren't a baby, but you were still young--in fifth or sixth grade. A lot has happened since then.

Some of you may not remember your baptism because you haven't been baptized. Maybe you never got around to it, and maybe you're still young and it's not yet your time. If baptism is something you've considered but haven't done, let Marti or I know. We'd love to talk more about it with you.

For those of you who have been baptized and do remember it, what do you remember? The temperature of the water? The people who were there? The circumstances leading up to it? The way you felt?

Were you baptized because you had to be? Because it was the right thing? Because everyone else was doing it? Because, well, you went through Pastor's Class and that's what was supposed to happen at the end.

When we come to this Sunday, the Sunday we reflect on Christ's baptism, we cannot help but bring our own experiences with baptism, that of our own, that of others, that of our children. And maybe we even bring some hesitations, questions, or confusion.

Because, frankly, baptism is a weird thing. Other than the pool at camp, where is it acceptable to dunk someone underwater? And not only is it acceptable, but we rejoice in the event, and refer to it as being life-changing? It might be one of the strangest things we do as disciples together.

I remember my baptism like it was yesterday. It wasn't, though. It was 25 years ago. I was ten, and I was baptized, mainly, because I believed that if I didn't, I would go to hell. It was a Wednesday. I had gone to our church midweek Bible Study. During the lesson the teacher asked us to imagine two doors, one that led to heaven and one that led to hell. And then he said, "Which door do you want to go through?"

Well, duh! The heaven door, of course! And so, that night, I decided I couldn't wait any longer, for fear of dying unexpectedly and going through the wrong door!

So later that evening, with my family and some close family friends and our minister watching, my dad baptized me.

And you know, even though I entered the water because I was afraid, and even though I was young--too young--to really understand much of anything that happened, when I came up, I felt good. Like something had changed. Like I was beloved.

There are few Jesus stories that show up in all four of the Gospels, but Jesus' baptism is one of them. The details vary, but every gospel begins--or quickly arrives--at Jesus' baptism. For the early church, Jesus' baptism was very important.

Today, we read the story from the Gospel of Luke, but usually when one wants to know about the baptism of Jesus, you go to Matthew or Mark. They have the most details of the event, and paint a picture we can remember. John's Gospel handles things very differently, telling the story indirectly, by John the Baptist testifying after the fact about baptising Jesus. And Luke's account...well, it's the most basic of them all.

Here's what Luke says: "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.'"

Where are all the important details, Luke? Jesus' baptism is almost an afterthought. He doesn't really tell the story. "Now when all the people were baptized...oh, and when Jesus was baptized too and later was saying a prayer..."

Today, if you go visit the Holy Land, I'm told a must see is the Jordan River. You can even be baptized in what is believed to be the very spot where Jesus was baptized.

But when Luke tells our story, we are told earlier that John is baptizing "in the region around the Jordan", but when Jesus arrives, we're not sure if they're in the Jordan River or not. In fact, we're not even sure John is there, for Luke just spent several verses telling us that John had just been arrested by Herod.

But there's one thing Luke doesn't miss: that the heavens open and the Holy Spirit, looking like a dove, descends on Jesus, and a voice from heaven speaks: "You are my son--THE BELOVED--I am pleased with you."

Christianity has argued for centuries over baptism. How to do it. When to do it. Should we baptize babies or adults? By sprinkling, pouring or immersion? In order to earn salvation or because we've already been saved? And does baptism have spiritual significance, at all, or it is just an earthly sign? Churches have divided over these very questions.

Which is why it's surprising that Luke doesn't pay much attention to the details. He moves right past the actual baptism of Jesus, leaving our questions hanging, and takes us to what happens afterwards. The heavenly voice. The Holy Spirit. The voice of God, saying, "You are my beloved. I'm pleased with you."

And it makes me wonder if maybe, maybe Luke skips the details to point us to the most important part of baptism.

I no longer believe that baptism is some magical get-out-of-hell-free card, and I'm not really interested in all the debates about the modes and methods of baptism, if it's for babies or adults or 5th and 6th graders. That is not the point. However and whenever it's done, God is big enough to work through it all.

There are a lot of reasons to be baptized and a lot of things we might remember from our own. But I wonder, through it all, *do you remember the voice?* "You are my beloved. I am pleased with you."

Baptism is a pretty weird thing. Why bother?

Because we need to hear the voice. In a world that tells us we are not good enough, not smart enough, talented enough, or loved enough, we need to know--beyond a doubt--that we are beloved, and that God is pleased with us.

That's why I prefer baptism by immersion, because I love what it signifies. That I'm going all in for God, and God is completely and utterly surrounding me with love. That every part of me is pleasing to God, and I am 100% beloved of God.

We need that moment--that sign--that grace from God that says, before our family and the church and the world, that I, a sinner, am beloved by God.

But there's one more thing in the text we read, the last sentence in our reading: "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work." At first it seems a throwaway sentence, one strangely specific detail in a story that skips most of the details.

But I think Luke wants us to realize how important Jesus' baptism was. He was 30, which, for someone in his time, was pretty much middle age. Yet his baptism changed his life forever, and sent him out to begin the work of his life, as Jesus shared with the world the message he heard at his baptism.

After Jesus' baptism, God calls him to begin his ministry. Everything changes. Through our baptism, God is calling us to do the same. What is your calling? Where is God leading you?

Baptism reminds us who we are, and it calls us to go out into this world and live like it. To live like God's beloved as we share God's love with our world.

Whenever and however your baptism happened, I hope you heard God's voice speaking to you through the water. It may take a while to let God's words take hold of you, but when you do, your life will never be the same.

Remember your baptism. Hear God's voice speak to you. You are worthy. You are beloved. God is pleased with you. And God is sending you out of the water into the world, to begin your work of sharing with others that they, too, are beloved by God.

Amen.