

The Beloved
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Luke 3:15-3:22 (NRSVA)

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

¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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."

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

The Baptism of Jesus

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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 thee I am well pleased.

Introduction:

To get us started, given that our text this morning deals with baptism and I grew up a Baptist, I want to share a Baptist baptism story with you.

The young son of a Baptist minister was in church one Sunday morning when he witnessed baptism by immersion for the first-time. He was greatly impressed by it, and the next morning proceeded to baptize his three kittens in the bathtub.

The young kittens, all-in-all, bore it very well, but mommy cat would have none of it. The old feline struggled with the boy, clawed and tore at him, and finally got away. With considerable effort, the boy caught the old girl again and proceeded with the "ceremony."

But the cat acted worse than ever, clawing and spitting, and scratching the boy's face.

Finally, after barely getting the cat splattered with water, he dropped her on the floor in disgust and said: "Fine then, just be a Methodist!"

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today are Luke's rather brief and somewhat lackluster account of Jesus' baptism. This may be because Luke, a sophisticated Hellenistic Jew, wrote long after and well outside of John's and Jesus' original Jewish setting in Galilee, and baptism may have picked up the connotations of the remission of individual, moral infractions in the minds of many as opposed to the collective awareness of those Jewish people who originally heard John's message.

I say this because no Jew, then or now, would understand baptism by emersion as anything other than a ceremonially act or a matter of personal hygiene. Forgiveness and atonement for infractions of God's laws were spelled out in detail in Leviticus and had nothing to do with being

baptized. Ceremonial bathing (in a Mikveh, Mikva'ot) had to do with one's mental and physical preparations for approaching the holy, during holy times and in holy spaces, or holy undertakings. Also, a baptism for the remission of one's accumulated moral infractions would run contrary to most people's understandings of Jesus as the sinless son of God, and would require, as it often does, a lot of convoluted justifications for Jesus' baptism. I tend to want to keep it simple and in context of the culture of the time.

I believe, again considering that John's audiences were Jews, baptism in today's text could best be understood as the answer to the crowd's question about what they must do in response to John's condemnations and demands that they turn around in their religious life-stances and attitudes in preparation for the coming of the Day of the Lord. And, for Jesus, I believe his baptism was a personal identification with God's claim on his life as he prepared to launch his life's divine undertaking or mission.

Forgiveness of sins, more properly rendered in Jesus' culture as a forgiveness of debts as we see in Matthew 6:9, carries a totally different implication than our modern sense of moral infractions per se. In Jesus' culture, debts were held by the wealthy and it seems some of the more pious wealthy and elite, who appeared to be indifferent to the harm they caused, wherein John's audiences, as well, formed a significant part of the backdrop for Luke's Gospel. John called such unrepentant and hard-hearted people a "generation of vipers."

Debts threaten the loss of land, livelihood, family, and social standing. Therefore, the forgiveness of a debt would have the character of restoration and returning a person to both self-sufficiency and to their rightful place in the community.¹ In the Greek, however, hamartia, sin, means to be without a share, miss the mark, be mistaken. So, in John's mind, people relying on just their Abrahamic heritage as a guarantee of divine favor on the coming Day of the Lord was totally wrong-headed. Thus, in response to the people's question as to what must they do to get right with God on the eve of the coming Judgment, given that they were missing the mark and were in danger of losing their share in the kingdom, John tells them,

"He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you."¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

Please note the question by the crowd was a "we" question not an "I" question. I mention this because a person's individual conscience was actually the internalized, collective opinion of his or her family or community. John does not tell people as individuals to confess their sins or moral infractions, but as a people, God's people, to mend their ways of relating to one another in some very practical ways. In particular, they are to care for those who are being victimized by the religious-political status quo by sharing their surpluses to ease the plight of the less fortunate. As a sign of a person's willingness to embrace not only the letter of God's Laws but its spirit, they were to publicly identify with this change of heart and behavior by being baptized, sort of a public vow, if you will, for all to see.

In addition, and very practically, those who held the debt of others were to forgive those impoverishing debts, especially with the day of divine judgment looming large, when all would be

¹ Bruce Malina; Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Kindle Locations 5068-5073). Kindle Edition.

revealed and made right. In doing so, the social stigma and dishonor was lifted from the debt holder and debtor alike, restoring both to an honorable status and share in the community of God.

Furthermore, those who have power or authority over others must stop abusing their power or authority or risk the wrath of God and the loss of their place in God's kingdom.

Thus, John's understandings of sins or debts and their forgiveness were very practical aspects of one's everyday relationships and behaviors toward others. Behaviors that needed changing for the benefit of all and pleased God. In short, the people's sins that they need to be forgiven for were religious complacency and indifference to the plight of others.

Such nuances in understanding John's call for repentance, baptisms, and Jesus' baptism reminds me of the priest, who approached a young father just before the baptism of his infant son and asked, "Given that baptism is a serious step are you prepared for it?"

"I think so," the young man replied. "My wife has made the house spotless and ready, and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of food for all of our guests."

"I don't mean that," the priest responded. "I mean, are you prepared spiritually?"

"Oh, sure," came the reply. "I've got a keg of beer and two cases of champagne."

As Christians, most of us recognize that baptism is more than just a religious rite of passage. Also, most of us understand that baptism is not some magic event or the infusion of some otherworldly stuff that inoculates us for eternal life. I think most of us are not unlike John's audience in this respect. Baptism was and is a culminating event in a process of religious education, self-evaluation, and a spiritual awareness of one's relationship to God, others, and our responsibilities to them. Therefore, baptism is a way in which a person gives public testimony, a vow of sorts, to an inner spiritual reality as they embark on a new relationship to God and others in the example of Jesus.

Luke, as do the other gospel writers, view John the Baptist as the herald of a new era of God's presence in human history. An era ruled over by God's Anointed One to the benefit of Jew and non-Jew alike. But I want you to notice something, when Jesus was baptized he was praying and he alone heard the voice from heaven affirming him and his ministry. How we know this is a matter of tradition in Luke's sources. However, the visible aspect of the Holy Spirit's hovering descent upon Jesus, symbolic of his ministerial empowerment, his "go" command if you will, was visible to all those in attendance. I draw attention to this to point because of its connection between a personal call to a relationship with God as evidenced in a public baptism, and the Holy Spirit as a divine and community affirmation of that relationship.

We each hear the call of God as a personal call - no one else hears our call. Our response to that call after prayer and soul searching is to commit our lives to God in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Thus, baptism occurs within the context of the community of faith and the body of Christ on earth, and symbolically participates in the Spirit's affirmation and empowers us for ministry.

There is much more we could say about our text today, but I would like to point out three things that I believe are very pertinent to our lives as Christians, to the church of Jesus Christ universal, and particularly for our church today.

First, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' ministry does not happen without his voluntary response to God's claim on his life. I am not talking about a superficial or perfunctory religious identification here. It is Soul Deep - down to the core of his being. This is to say that God's ministry will not happen in our lives and in our church's life unless we are willing to internalize God's claim on us soul deep. We must live out Jesus' example, while standing ready for all its trials and tribulations unto death.

Secondly, Jesus' ministry did not happen without a public identification and expression of God's claim on his life. Jesus often stood toe-to-toe with the religious-political authorities of his day and proclaimed his insights into God's will and ways that ran contrary to their practices, giving no quarter. He associated with those who needed God's soul-healing words and compassion regardless of their socio-economic or religious status. He did not sit and wait for people to come to him, but went out, making himself available to all seekers.

Third, Jesus' ministry did not happen without a dynamic and consistent life of prayer, especially in Luke's Gospel. Jesus' prayers were not "gimme" prayers or "woe is me" prayers. Jesus' prayers were deep struggles to find God's will and the strength and courage to implement his insights in the life of this world.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the great modernist minister of the last century, said, "Prayer is the soul of religion. Failure in prayer is the loss of religion itself in its inward and dynamic aspect of fellowship with the Eternal."

Jesus' ministry was one of struggle. His struggles began with his temptation in the wilderness. He struggled with his disciples, his family, his religious leaders, and the forces of evil. Yet, he did not back up, retreat, or quit. He stayed the course, he stepped out in faith and fought the good fight as it were, and in the end, he was triumphant because he trusted God's claim on his life.

Let me share with you a radical idea from one of the captains of industry. It is an example which could have been taken from the pages of the New Testament. For its first forty-seven years, Merle Norman Cosmetics relied on word-of-mouth advertising. When it decided to launch an advertising campaign, it studied the ads from other major cosmetic firms. When it blocked out the name of the advertiser, no one could identify the cosmetic maker with the advertisement. It is because of this, that Merle Norman came up with a woman shown "before" and "after" using Merle Norman cosmetics. Sales tripled in the next five years.

If people see no positive and meaningful difference in the lives of Christians who claim the sanctity and the vow of baptism, as opposed to non-Christians - sort of the "befores" and "afters" - why would they want to give up sleeping in, having a leisurely Sunday brunch, go skiing, or to the lake on Sunday morning instead of attending our church or any church?

Do you want to know one of the leading reasons many Christian are reluctant to give witness to Christ? No, it is not a lack of biblical knowledge. It is simply that the way they behave toward and around others is often inconsistent with how they should live and behave, so they are reluctant to invite others to church or give testimony for God in Christ lest they appear hypocritical. In short, people tuck their salvation away and hide its light of God under a bushel basket called "its personal".

Another major reason people fail to give witness to God in their lives is they don't want to be branded a religious nut; that is, they don't want to stand out from the herd by speaking about their faith and God's moral and ethical demands on people's lives. Yet, people in this country, according to many polls, are hungry for a spiritual life and relationship to the holy. Trouble is that they are seeking it in many of the wrong places and wrong ways because Christianity in most of its mainline manifestations turn people off by their rigid, sectarian battles and competitions, dogmas, institutional demands, or worse yet, laissez faire, nothing-required-of-you-religions.

Jesus prayed while he was being baptized, and everyone saw the results of his prayer as the Holy Spirit settled upon him. The proof of his ministry was in the power of the Holy Spirit that led him to preach, heal, comfort, and to lead people into a wholesome relationship with God and one another. The same power that hovered over and anointed Jesus that day is the same power that moved you and me to accept him as the Christ of God; the same power that affirmed our life in God, when we were baptized or confirmed; the same power that is available to us now to help us

pray, preach, teach, comfort, heal, and save others from a life of existential dread, alienation, and meaninglessness in life against the backdrop of death.

It never ceases to amaze me that Christians believe and readily embrace the power of God in Jesus to "save" them in death while denying or foregoing that power to transform their lives and the life of our world. Please, let us go soul deep, embrace the potential of God's spirit in our lives, and let that presence lead us into being all that God desires for us personally and in the life of this church and its ministry so that we may experience the fullest joy of being God's sons and daughters of light, **the beloved**; in whom God is well pleased.

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