

Reflection for January 9, 2022

Baptism of Jesus – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

... whether you are joining us from your homes or you are in the church building – welcome!

During the Christmas season, we celebrated and feasted, basking in the joy of Jesus's coming. Now, we are in the second Sunday in the season of Epiphany. Jesus was anticipated, he was born, and now he is revealed.

This season can be a needed balm to our souls and a bolster to our hearts. What began at Christmas continues but it takes on a new form, a slower pace. We make space to linger in the glow of the light of the world. And, like the magi, we set out on a journey, a pilgrimage of sorts, seeking the sacred light of the world. We aim to come and see so that we might also go and tell. As we begin to return to more regular rhythms and ordinary days, this is a wonderful season to reflect and reset.

This week celebrates the baptism of Jesus, one of three traditional focal points for Epiphany through which Jesus' identity "shows forth" — the other two being the visit of the Magi and Jesus turning water into wine during the Wedding at Cana (the story coming up next week!).

I would like to start our exploration of the baptism of Jesus with a video from Work of the People featuring Rachel Held Evans. Rachel was a *New York Times* best-selling author who wrote about faith, doubt and life in the Bible Belt. I personally have found Rachel's books intriguing and thought-provoking. Here she is talking about being beloved.

(VIDEO)

When I was preparing for today, there were three things that stuck out to me – three areas I would like to explore with you:

- questions
- prayer
- identity (claimed by God and 'beloved')

The story opens with the people filled with expectation and questioning in their hearts about John (Luke 3:15). Questions have been so important to my own faith, I doubt I could be part of a faith community that didn't leave room for questions and discussion. I wouldn't trust it. So, I appreciate how this passage starts with people voicing their questions. I also appreciate the community aspect of the story – at first *all* are questioning, and later *all* are baptized. It is often helpful to bring our questions to the group, at yet we seem to have such a hard time voicing them out, perhaps afraid of what others might think. That is one of the reasons I love working with kids. They just ask the questions on their mind.

The crowds observing John's actions asked questions filled with expectation and introspection. In the gospel of Luke, the Greek term, *prosdokaō* (pros- da-kah-o), means waiting, expecting, and giving thought to something that is, yet, unknown or manifest. It is to look toward future possibilities .

In Luke's gospel, the action of waiting and expecting is frequently deployed as the posture of a general group, like the unnamed crowds in our story today, gathered around John the Baptist. Group questions are not a sign of doubt, faithlessness, or even ignorance. Rather, it represents a collective participation and interest in the current moment of God's revelation and action. It shows people paying attention. With its initial focus on the people's expectation and questions, Luke 3:15 highlights the important role of our faith communities' questions. If we are willing to be vulnerable, questions can be tool for discerning the movements and messages of Spirit and faith in our contemporary time.

I wonder what questions you have?

I wonder how our questions might help us discern how God is a work in Cordova Bay?

There is a four-part sequence in today's story from the gospel of Luke:

- (1) the people who asked questions were baptized, followed by
- (2) Jesus' baptism, and
- (3) his prayerful moment, accompanied by
- (4) a visual and auditory revelation (the heavens open, 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." (Luke 3:21-22)).

Throughout his gospel, Luke shows us Jesus praying. Jesus prays before he calls his disciples (Luke 6:12), before asking them who he is (Luke 9:18), at the time of his transfiguration (9:29), before teaching his disciples how to pray (Luke 11:1), on the night of his arrest (Luke 22:41), and at his death (Luke 23:46). For Luke, what is characteristic of Jesus will also be characteristic of the church. In Acts, Luke shows us the church in prayer as they wait for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8, 14). And after the promised Spirit come upon them at Pentecost, they continue the regular practice of prayer. What is begun in baptism is lived out through the practice of prayer by which one receives the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus was empowered by and guided in his ministry through prayer, so too are his followers, down to us today.

We as readers are not privy to the contents of Jesus' prayer, all we know is that he comes to God in prayer. He will not undertake his public ministry of teaching and healing by his own power and abilities. The source of his strength will be beyond himself. The Holy Spirit will encourage him all the way, even when the way becomes difficult. The disciples will learn this posture of prayer from Jesus, as the Spirit will give them the stamina and patience to love and love again in faithful ministry.

I have been thinking a lot about prayer lately. Why it is important to me, in particular. These past few months, I have really come to depend on prayer. For me it is that time to take a deep breath, to reset, to take what is on my heart/mind about the world, about myself and bring it to God. The tricky part, the part that I sometimes have difficulty with is to be still and open enough to "hear" God's response. The theologian Walter Brueggemann says that the really important thing about prayer is the insistence that it is a genuine dialogue with somebody who is at the other end of the conversation (Work of the People – "Faithful Practices"). To think that we dare be in conversation with the Creator of heaven and earth is a mind boggling claim, but it is the ultimate conviction that we are not alone in the world, that God has maintained an attentive presence.

For me, I need the discipline of coming to a faith community on a regular basis to remind myself to pray, to hear God's narrative (that I am beloved and enough and

that the Spirit is with me) rather than the world's – and to give thanks to God for that alternative narrative.

I wonder what your prayer practices are?

I wonder the role prayer plays in your life?

It was when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, that was when the heavens open and the Spirit descends and a voice from heaven says, “you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22).

The theme of the “beloved child” echoes through the ages in Scripture: speaking to Abraham, for example, God refers to Isaac as “your only son, whom you love”; likewise, God calls the anointed one, “my son,” “my chosen, in whom my soul delights”; and in this week's reading from Isaiah, God puts it this way: “you are precious in my sight, / and honored, and I love you” (Gen 2:22; Psalm 2:7; Isa 42:1; Isa 43:4). Luke draws on this ancient language in his story of Jesus' baptism.

I appreciated how in the video Rachel Held Evans reminds us that as part of the body of Christ, we too are children of God. Baptism is a naming of someone as a child of God. Joanne read the words of Isaiah today (43:1) “I have called you by name, you are mine.”

You don't become a child of God when you cross off a list of things to do or even when you are baptized. Baptism is simply a naming, an acknowledgement of someone's existing beloved-ness. I am grateful for the reminder that part of baptism is the renunciation of the narratives the world puts on us (failure, fake, fat, slut, addict, rich, powerful, pretty, right), and remember we are beloved of God and that is more than enough – that is good news. We need to hear this affirmation from God, and we need to hear it from one another. Jesus heard the words from heaven, they changed his life forever. They can do the same for our children, our neighbours, our family, our church, even our enemies.

I wonder when you have really felt beloved?

I wonder what competing voices are stopping you from hearing and truly knowing that you are enough?

I wonder what we will do with this identity that we are children of God?

While it's certainly true that the story of Jesus' baptism recounts how Jesus is singled out as God's Beloved, at the same time the story exemplifies the way of life to which the Beloved calls anyone who would seek to follow. Not a life of presumption or arrogance, but rather of humility and solidarity. God walks — and washes — with us ordinary, flawed people! As children of God, baptized in the Spirit, we are called to follow Jesus on a path of unassuming compassion, and always gladly embracing the Spirit's sanctifying, restoring, empowering renewal. For each one of us, and everyone we meet, is a beloved child of God!

Sources:

<https://www.saltproject.org>

www.workingpreacher.org

<https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/>

www.thebibleproject.org

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/>

Feasting on the Word Commentary

Baptism

*A voice from heaven says,
"This is my Child, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased."*

—Matthew 3.17

My child, I know who you are.
You are the issue of my love,
my self spoken into this world.
At times if you doubt, remember
your secret name: Beloved.
I know the gifts I have given you,
the compassion I have planted in you,
how the world will call to those gifts,
will need you and feed on you
and wound you deeply.
Remember those gifts in you are me.
At times you may feel alone,
strange, unbelonging. Know that you Belong.

Know that I am in you and you in me
as deeply as you are in this water.
When you pass through raging waters
they will not overwhelm you.
I will be with you; I will be in you.
In all things, in your miracles and failures,
you are my light. You are my delight.
Go now, into your cobbled, radiant life
and shine with me

Steve Garnaas-Holmes
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For those wondering about the wheat and the chaff, I found this commentary helpful:

But what should we make of John's remark that Jesus will come with "his **winnowing fork** in his hand"? Is this an image of including some but excluding others? On the contrary, the metaphor points in the other direction: every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers (even today) use wind to separate these husks – collectively known as "chaff" – from the grain itself, the goal being, of course, to save every grain, not to separate the good grain from the bad grain. This is a metaphor of preservation and sanctification, not division. Like an expert restoring a work of art, what the wind and fire remove are the impurities: the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that make us less generous, less fair, or less respectful of others. Each of us requires restoration, liberation from whatever "husks" are holding us back. And sure enough, later in Luke and Acts, this is exactly how the wind and fire of the Spirit work: not to divide or destroy, but to connect, sanctify, purify, challenge, restore, and empower (see, for example, [Luke 4:1-21](#); [Acts 2:1-4](#)).

<https://www.saltproject.org>

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