

The Baptism of Our Lord, 2013

Grace Episcopal Church
January 20, 2013
Sermon by Rev. Linda Packard

The name of this Sunday is the Baptism of the Lord, and following the Feast of The Epiphany, it is another epiphany. This celebration comes around every year, and this year it is Luke's turn to describe what went on. On purpose I left in the gospel reading three verses that are officially left out -- the ones that tell us about the trouble John has gotten into and that he's been hauled off to jail, Given the overwhelming witness of the other three gospels, this timeline may not be accurate and John mostly likely was there to baptize Jesus, but for Luke that is not what is important. What is important is that Jesus is the focus of this telling.

There are still great numbers of other people around, for we know from all the gospel tellings that John baptized many, and preached, preached the coming of the Messiah, and ranted and railed at people as you, and -- fatally -- criticized the local Roman authority so much he was taken out of circulation -- the other gospels tell us just how permanently.

But today the focus is Jesus, Jesus in prayer, Jesus for whom, during prayer, the heavens open. Jesus on whom the Spirit of God rests in the form of a dove, and Jesus who hears himself being called, "You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It is a voice, a visitation by God in the power of the Holy Spirit that empowers him for his appointed ministry; for us, an epiphany of who Jesus is.

He has been baptized by water. Now he is baptized with the fire of the Holy Spirit. He arises knowing who he is and to what he has been called . God has claimed him as God's Beloved, named him in the most important sense of being named, and he is given what he needs for the job, for his life, ahead. He begins the process of fully know his vocation But it is a beginning.

It is the beginning of Jesus decisively moving into his vocation as Savior and Redeemer. I believe he progresses in following his vocation, and in the following, comes to more and more deeply know who he is and what he is for, this movement in vocational understanding is part of the humanity of Jesus. Part of his kinship with us.

We see an important part of that in his baptism. His anointing with the Spirit and the confirmation of his sonship takes him through the immediate temptations in the wilderness that follow on his baptism.

But following one's vocation, even with such direct support from God isn't easy. Remember, the next time he hears that Divine voice, this time clearly heard by the others with him, occurs in the Transfiguration on the Mountain. In that place, Jesus hears again he is the beloved Son and that those with him should listen to him. What follows on this epiphany, however, is his descent into the valley of darkness and death as he moves toward his crucifixion.

But as he moves through his life to his death, and beyond, Jesus does not lose track of his identity. It is rooted in this day, in his baptism, baptism by water certainly, but also baptism by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

This morning we have heard from Isaiah, those powerful words, "I have called you by name, you are mine." The "you" in question is not an individual, of course, it is a whole people, Israel. And that people when they hear these words are in exile,, like the Syrians who even now flee from the horror of life in their own country, or like the parents in Connecticut where the killing of their children has exiled them to a land of grief they could not have imagined, This is different from who we are, isn't it?, who live through the majority of our days in stability if not always the comfort we thought we would have.

Yet I have come to know in my own life and what other folk have brought me as priest about their own lives, in the midst of what looks like peace and well being these are times of real trial and personal testing. It is in such times of trial, even more than when "living is easy" that we discover and rediscover our vocation.

Butcher, baker, candlestick maker... how easy, how set, that nursery rhyme sounds, especially when we set it against what we come to know of finding our way through life.

In 1994 a collection of sermons given by our currently retiring Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was published. Two of them are on vocation, In the first he posits the view many of us have, or least begin with, that somehow when we hear God say, "I have called you by name you are mine." what follows next is that God reaches in his pocket and extracts the part he has decided you will play; large or small, notorious or unknown, to your liking or not. rather arbitrary, but to be lived into if you are a faithful disciple.

But that cannot be. When Jesus hears, "You are my beloved son," that son is beloved as who he is at that moment. If we realized that as children of God we too are called into the company of being the beloveds of God, it is because of who we are, right now!

Not what we might do, or how we might screw up, or because we are good at standing line and accepting the chit of paper on which is written, butcher, mother, bakers, journalist, artist, housekeeper, lawyer, doctor, beggar-man, thief.

It is rather that our whole life is spent really listening all the time to what God is saying to us, all the time; how we are being blessed, how we are being tested, more and more deeply to know who we are. And this conversation continues.

Does this sound an entirely individual experience? Not always. We often need brothers and sisters in the faith, as well as our experiences in the world, to help tell us that, so that we can most deeply be who God has created us to be. Therein lies the discernment of your vocation.

Just last week there was a cartoon in the New Yorker by Bruce Eric Kaplan, an artists who specializes in somewhat square, chunky, often grumpy people that illustrates well with few words, a part of this truth.



Because what we are talking about in vocational discernment is deep and internal work.

Watch Jesus, Keep our eyes on Jesus, did he not grow in the sense of his calling from his disciples, from the women and men whose lives he changed, but whose lives also changes him? This is how we are to live too if we are intent on finding and following our vocations in God. It all begins in baptism.

Does it make any difference, this baptism we have taken on, this baptism to which we bring our offspring, by and large our custom, committing ourselves to their spiritual care, but sometimes most beautifully this baptism to which adults who missed it stand up and seek it out?

Indeed it does, which is why this day we renew our baptismal vows. Yes, you will recognize it as a call and response of the Nicene Creed which we say/pray/recite together almost every Sunday. I use several verbs because just as our understanding of God and the Direction of our own life changes over time, so too does the manner in which we incorporate and proclaim this traditional affirmation of our faith. The Creed is a confirmation of what we believe and it reminds us how we are drawn to baptism and the life that flows from it.

It is different for each of us. It is life saving that we find our way.

I can find no better words to express this than the ones Williams wrote in his second sermon.

"Vocation may be to be *what* we are, but that doesn't leave us *where* we are. We shall need to work to find the structure and form of life that is most our own because (my emphasis) it leaves us most alert, most responsive, most open to the never-failing grace of God. We have to find the meter for our poem, the key in which to sing our song to God, the [place] where we can pray to him, the person in whom we can love him, so as to give 'a local habitation and a name,' face and flesh, to our particular following of Christ." [p. 159, A Ray of Darkness]

The Rev. Linda Packard

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Psalms 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3: 15-22