

Baptism of Our Lord (15Jan17)
Matthew 3:13-17, Acts 10:34-43

The first thing for today is an explanation and apology. Epiphany is January 6, and this festival of the Baptism of Our Lord is usually the first Sunday after Epiphany, which was last Sunday, but we were celebrating our choral service. So when you have to explain to friends and classmates and coworkers tomorrow that your church is a little slow, I apologize for that. We'll see if we can fix it by the end.

In spite of our slowness, this was worth not bypassing. Actually, Jesus says that right in the Gospel reading. John the Baptist wanted to skip past it, to avoid the baptism of Jesus, but Jesus says, "Nope. We need this."

We may wonder what about the baptism of Jesus we need, or why this is worth paying attention to. We may ask, does it tell us something important about Jesus, or is it because it tells us something important about us?

To start reflecting on this occasion, it sure seems that the baptism of Jesus is not like ours. I mean, we had nine baptisms here this past year, most of them when we were gathered together for Sunday worship services. You were here and part of those experiences. So how would you describe them? Nice? Community-building? Good to see young families and cute babies?

Nobody said that at a single one of those baptisms the roof was torn off the building, a bright light shone in on the child or a dove came to rest on them. And the voices we heard didn't come echoing with the thunder but were plain old regular human voices. So we might draw distinctions that the baptism of Jesus was extraordinary, was special, very different from our baptism.

With that, another line is often drawn that our baptism washes away sins, but Jesus didn't have any sins to wash away. Matthew doesn't seem concerned about making that theological point in this story. I mention it partly because we have a bad conception of sin, mostly viewing it as the nasty little secrets and bad habits and quirky peccadilloes and guilty pleasures, but that is really a weak definition of sin.

More than that, though, this account of the baptism of Jesus isn't trying to tell us about what Jesus isn't, but who Jesus is. That gets obscured by how our lectionary chooses pericopes, or little snippets, lifted out of the larger context. Here are the verses right before today's reading: John the Baptist proclaimed "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but a more powerful one than I is coming after me; I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and...burn the chaff with unquenchable fire." (3:10-12)

Against all that fierceness, you could feel the tone shift as if our reading today began with a big but: but "then Jesus came." John seems to have expected a tough guy, busting in, taking charge, tossing out the bums. But Jesus comes, not with the ax or burning chaff or in all his glory, but comes and asks to be baptized.

That's the first important thing we learn here about Jesus. Asking what it tells us, while you could take it that Jesus needed to repent or was just a wimp, it's better and more likely that his means and ends weren't John's. So he could be modeling what it's like to turn from our own ways and toward God's way. Or showing us that God's grace is never earned but always received as a gift. Maybe he goes

through with it so we can hear about the Spirit resting on him and the voice calling him the Beloved Son. Maybe it's about the importance of baptism.

That raises the next question, of whether the baptism of Jesus is like our baptisms or is completely different. By the simple fact that there aren't these miraculous phenomena at our baptisms, does that mean we're left with something second rate?

I'd argue wholeheartedly against that. I firmly believe some of the point in this story about Jesus is so we can understand the same thing in our baptisms. Even though you couldn't see the Spirit descending on you, and even though it sounded like my voice, or like some pastor's voice, or whoever did it, still by means of your baptism, with that splash of water, God was declaring: I choose you. You are my son. You are my daughter. I love you. I'm pleased with you. That message of claiming you always and delighting in you no matter what is exactly the purpose and reason for baptism.

Your baptism expressly connects you to Jesus. Within our baptismal liturgy, that's proclaimed in words of prayer saying, "At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit. By the baptism of Jesus' death and resurrection you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live in you." That's why the paschal candle is rekindled today, as a reminder that your baptismal candles share that flame, a symbol of Jesus' death and resurrected presence. As we remember our baptisms in a minute, we renew the covenant connection with newness of life in Jesus.

That points to another aspect of reflection for this day. There have been times when we associated baptism with going to heaven, through the promise of eternal life. That was vital yesterday at the memorial service for John

Goltermann, for example. It can be the central promise for baptism in newborn intensive care units.

But mostly, when we gather in church and when we need to think about our baptisms, it isn't because we're worried about going to heaven. It isn't only about death and resurrection like rising from the grave, but is dying to an old way of living and newness of life we're living into already.

We have some of that perspective from Martin Luther. Today you have in bulletins the first bit of his Small Catechism, and it will be most of the way through this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation before we get to the section on baptism, but for a preview, Luther reminds us that baptism means a daily dying and rising. It's not only amid tragedy or after we've drawn our last breath, but is about how we're rising to live each and every day. It's not just an eventuality, but is actually changing you here and now.

This is similar to a discussion with Confirmation students and their families and mentors this week, that it's foolish to think of Confirmation as happening once and for all, that in the spring of 8th grade you're able to say, Yes, I agree with this faith and am interested in participating in it. Rather, every single day we could be Confirmed, could gather here at church and say to each other, here's what I believe today and where I'm left wondering, here's what I find important, here's how I expect God is working in me and in this world. That every-day-Confirmation would be essentially the remembrance of baptism, the daily dying and rising, the repentance of trying to orient our lives on what God is calling us toward and working in us.

The ongoing reality of living as beloved by God and embodying that for daily existence was also the case for Jesus; if it would've only

been about his death, about his ending on the cross and the promise of new life from the tomb, then Jesus could've been baptized near the very end of the Gospel. Instead he does it right away, so we know this promise and the presence of the Holy Spirit with him in all of his life, in all that he does, with the power to go "about doing good and [struggling against] the devil," as we heard Acts describe his ministry. Again paralleling our lives, most of us were baptized as infants, not as an insurance against something bad, but as assurance that God's blessing is with us in all that happens to us, throughout our lives and beyond, giving us power to keep doing what's right.

I began with an apology that you'd have to say your congregation is a little slow, but also wanted to redeem that slowness. For your existence this week, you may need the promise of God's presence and some hope for life. This week, as we face new beginnings which may be accompanied by worries and challenging tasks and so many possibilities of striving to embody God's goodness in our world, here to conclude are words of encouragement and blessing from Martin Luther King Jr.:

Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores, and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain."

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to [hu]mankind as a whole ... This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly

concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [hu]mankind.

We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. ...

We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. ...

*Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons [and daughters] of God, and our brothers [and sisters] wait eagerly for our response.**

That's what your baptism is for. Amen

* from "A Time to Break Silence" in *A Testament of Hope*, p242-244