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Baptism of Our Lord
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United Parish of Bowie
Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

JESUS CHOOSES BAPTISM

Well, back at the end of the second century, it might have seemed like a good idea, the logical thing to do.

Tatian, who was a second century Christian Assyrian apologist, thought it might be helpful to combine all Matthew, Mark, Luke and John into a harmonic narrative of the life and death of Jesus. This document came to be known as the Diatessaron.

It was a harder task than he thought. Truth be known the result was quite a mess (my opinion) because he had to resolve so many differences in the way the four Gospel writers told the same story. So, he ended up putting in his own edits without any substantial connections to the original manuscripts. Many stories were left out, and nuances of each Gospel writers' accounts were diluted and lost. The document was authoritative and remained so in some of the churches. But most of the early church fathers soon decided that each Gospel stood on its own in full authority despite the varying accounts of the same event.

We can relate. We have often been in the position of listening to varying accounts of the same event. Sometimes the accounts are very close with slight variation in nuance and emphasis. At other times, the accounts are so different we wonder if the people telling the story were even at the same event.

Thus, it is with the Gospel writers, varying accounts of the same event.

Matthew begins the story of Jesus' life with a genealogy and an angel coming to Joseph in a dream to tell him about Mary's pregnancy. In Mark, there is no birth narrative. Mark begins the story of Jesus with baptism. Now, in Luke, we have a full account of the angel coming to Mary, Mary going to Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem, shepherds and angels, the dedication in the temple, fleeing to Egypt and the twelve year old Jesus getting lost from his parents in the synagogue. In John's Gospel, we are given a cosmological and theological introduction to Jesus as the Word being made flesh and the light coming into the darkness. All different and yet giving each Gospel its own witness and authority might not give us a clear chronology of events, but it does give us a deeper, fuller and richer sense of who Jesus is and why he came into this world.

With the baptism of Jesus, the Gospel accounts have different emphases.

In today's lesson Luke, who had given us many words about Jesus' birth and early days, gives us very few words about Jesus' baptism. Yet, these few words give an important message. All we know according to Luke about the baptism of Jesus is that Jesus chooses to be baptized with all the people and immediately after he prays and the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon him. That's all we know and it's a lot.

The people are confused and think that John might be the promised Messiah. John baptizes, but John's is a baptism of repentance. There will still be water, but Jesus' baptism is the presence of the Holy Spirit and fire burning away the old and making all things new. Jesus' baptism is a turning point; John the Baptist's ministry is coming to an end. Jesus' ministry is beginning.

But before it does, according to Luke's account, Jesus goes and stands in line with the people who are waiting to be baptized by John. Jesus chooses baptism and presents himself as an act of solidarity with the people who have been broken by the wear and tear of a sinful world, with the sin-sick and downtrodden who sought hopes of new beginnings. Jesus chooses baptism because he identifies with the damaged and broken people in need of God.

And immediately upon baptism, Jesus prays! Prayer and the connection it gives us to God is highlighted throughout Luke's Gospel.

Jesus prays and heaven opens. The Holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came to Jesus, "You are my Son, with you, I am well pleased."

One day a woman went to her church's Bible study and took her seven-year-old grandson. He was off from school and it was her day to babysit so she took him to Bible study with her along with a box of legos as entertainment. But he became very engaged with the Bible study and listened to the discussion about Jesus' baptism. "You look like you have something to say," said the pastor. "Well," said the young man. "You said that heaven opened. Does that mean that God is on the loose?"

It does! God and the Holy Spirit are on the loose in the world.

At our baptisms, the Holy Spirit comes upon us to seal us and mark us as Christ's own forever. Each of us can hear the voice of God telling us that we belong to God, that we are God's beloved. We only baptize once in our tradition, but we renew our baptismal vows often, and each time, we can be reminded that God calls us "beloved."

So, what specifically does Luke's version of Jesus' baptism teach the church?

First, it teaches us about belonging! Jesus did not have a private baptism. He stood among the people seeking to be made new in solidarity because he wanted them to know that no matter what had happened in their lives, they would always

belong to God. That is an important message that we, as Christians, need to take to the world.

The Rev. Eugene Peterson wrote these words about belonging:

“Very often we feel left out of things, like we don’t belong. We look around and others seem so confident, so sure of themselves, like insiders who know the secret language. So often in reaction to that, we form our own club where we can feel like the insiders. Unfortunately, we often live by the principle of exclusions; we’re in, they’re out. It’s at work on many levels. We often reduce the gift of human community to membership- you’re in or you’re out.”

Unfortunately, this can be at work in our churches. Churches may say all the right words; that we are hospitals for sinners and refuges for those who have lost their way, but too often the message gets sent that respectable, successful folks are the ones we need to build the community. Time and again people who encounter difficulties and dark times in their lives drop out of churches because they no longer feel worthy of belonging. If we’re not vigilant, churches can become like country clubs

In choosing baptism Jesus sends a different message. He stands with those in solidarity who are seeking redemption, new life, new beginnings letting them know by his presence that there is nothing that can separate them from belonging to God and that God’s voice calls them “Beloved.”

Father Henri Nouwen spent the last year’s of his life in a community for those with physical disabilities. He says that the tapes playing in many of the heads of these residents spoke words such as “You are a burden. You don’t fit in. You don’t belong. If you want to be loved, you’d better prove that you are worthy.”

But the tape that Nouwen sought to put into their heads was

“The life that God intends for you is one in which you gradually learn to listen to the voice that spoke to Jesus at his baptism, the voice that says, “You are my beloved. My favor rests on you. I love you with an everlasting love. I have molded you in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I have written your name on the palm of my hand and you live in the shade of my embrace. You belong to me. You are safe where I am. Do not be afraid. This is the truth of who you are. This is the truth.”

Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism is about standing with the people and the message of belonging.

Luke account of the Jesus’s baptism is also about prayer, the first act of Jesus following his baptism.

Before Jesus begins his ministry, he is not only standing with sinners but coming to God in prayer for strength that is beyond himself. God will equip and give the patience and the stamina to love and love again and again in faithful ministry.

So, do our churches depend enough on that Holy Spirit as the source of strength and stamina?

This prayerful connection is the lifeline of every disciple, every congregation, every ministry, but the prayer life of a community has to be cultivated, practiced and valued. How are you doing that as the community of the United Parish of Bowie?

The Reverend Robert Brearley writes, “ Luke uses very few words to share with us the baptism of the Lord. But those few words lead us to very deep wellsprings of joy in faithful ministry. To identify with God’s children, wherever they are in life, to depend on God in prayer for the strength to live and love and to hear the affirmation of God as the source of our calling and purpose in life are the blessings of our life together in the church.” Are they our priorities?

We can be reminded that they should be our priorities as we remember our baptism, that we belong to Christ, that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, that we can hear over and over again, God calling us “Beloved.”

If you haven’t been baptized and that is yet to come, know that God is standing ever ready to root you in the identity of Christ and seal you as Christ’s beloved forever.

As we celebrate the baptism of our Lord on this day, remember your baptism, hear God calling you “Beloved,” be thankful and by the strength and power of the Holy Spirit in this year, bring the love of God to this world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.