

January 10, 2010

Scripture: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Sermon: "Baptized by Water, Baptized by Fire"

Baptism. It is one of the sacraments of the church that always seems to have this mysterious air surrounding it. There is something about feeling the water drip over our heads and roll down our faces. There is something about hearing the gush of the water as its boundaries are broken by human hands. There is something about seeing someone being baptized that renews all our souls. There is just something about that moment when the water touches our foreheads.

When that water touches our foreheads, it's like tears of joy flowing over us. When that water touches our foreheads, it's like a big sloppy kiss that only grandmothers can give. When that water touches our foreheads, it's like a gentle rain washing away our worries, our fears, and our uncertainties.

When that water touches our foreheads, it is like no other. When that water touches our foreheads, we are changed. When that water touches our foreheads, we know that we are claimed and named. When that water touches our foreheads, we know that we have been marked by a visible sign of invisible grace.

When that water touches our foreheads, we experience the hope, love, peace of God as it washes us clean, begins to break down the barriers that separates us from God, and enlivens and renews us.

There is something about that moment when we emerge from the waters, changed, named and claimed.

And it is that moment which is so important in our Scriptures today. It is almost as if Luke is saying, Look I know that baptisms are performed in many different ways in many different traditions. Look, I know that some traditions practice infant sprinkling. Some traditions practice immersion. And there is a great debate among church traditions on the "right" way to baptize. There is great debate among church traditions on the purpose of baptism. There is even a great debate among church traditions on whether Jesus needed to be baptized and what that means for his divinity vs. humanity.

It is almost as if Luke is saying, Look, I know that all these things surround the sacrament of baptism, but let's put those aside because today, I want my readers and all the communities of faith to remember is that moment. That moment where the skies open up and we feel the Holy Spirit feeling our hearts and our minds and we hear the words: This is my Beloved, with you I am well pleased. That moment when we as people of faith made our profession and said yes, we are called to something more. We are called to remember that God's Spirit "was made flesh". We are called to remember that God gave God's only Son so that our lives would be transformed, that we are called to "breathe God's Spirit in and share it with others."

That's the significant moment for Jesus and that is the moment that is significant for us as followers of Jesus. That moment when we are claimed and named by God. That moment when

we embrace our relationship with God. That moment when the Holy Spirit enters into our lives and enlivens us as people of faith.

That's the moment that is important.

For the author of Luke, it is the moment when Jesus emerges from the waters that is important. There are actually very few details of the baptism but Luke goes into great detail about the moment when Jesus emerges from the waters. He shares that Jesus begins to pray. And the Holy Spirit comes down, like a dove, and Jesus hears a voice that claims him and names him: You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased. That is what is important for the author of Luke. That moment when Jesus was claimed and named. That moment when Jesus took up the mantle of ministry and showed that there is something more than this world can offer. That moment when Jesus emerged from the waters, transformed, enlivened, renewed, refreshed, showing that God is moving in his life and that through his life, the world would be blessed.

All four gospels mention the baptism in some form or another. For the authors of Mark and Matthew, Jesus' baptism was a defining moment in his ministry. They have the greatest detail about the event. In John, the baptism is hinted at through the testimony of John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Luke, the account of Jesus' baptism follows a speech from John the Baptist. We hear of John talking about baptizing with water. We hear John talking about fire burning away the chaff. We hear John talking about repentance. And we remember back to those moments that surround the birth of John and Jesus. The moment when God's love became evident in the birth of a Son. The moment when God's grace became visible for all of God's children. The moment when the gift of hope was given to all of God's creation.

And so as readers, we hear this fire and brimstone speech by John the Baptist, not to put fear in our hearts but to remember that we are called to re-orient our lives. We are called to remember that for God to be a God to hold to one's promises and to be a God of justice, there must be judgment. But judgment is not the last word. Grace is the last word.

And that word comes in that moment when we emerge from the waters and we hear, "You are my Beloved, in you I am well pleased."

When we hear John's speech, we are called to remember that our God claimed us and named us from the very beginning and that our God is a God of grace.

And so what Luke wants his readers and us to hear and understand is that we are called to re-orient our lives to the principles of the Kingdom of God. Our God has named us and claimed us from the very beginning and in that moment when we emerge from the waters, we claim God as our own as well. We recognize that we are called to be in relationship with God. We recognize that we are called to be in relationship with all of God's children. When we emerge from the waters, we are celebrating that we are God's own. We are celebrating that we have been marked by a "visible sign of invisible grace" and our lives will never be the same again.

It is not until we own our relationship with God, it is not until "we [understand and truly believe that] we are made, loved, and claimed by God as God's children, that we [will realize that

we]have nothing to offer this world that it cannot offer us.” When we emerge from the baptismal waters, as the waters roll down our foreheads and drip down our bodies, we as people of faith loudly proclaim: “[We] are God’s beloved children and that God is moving in and through [our] lives to bless this world.”

And so on this Sunday, when we remember our baptisms, “we celebrate and affirm God’s deep love for each of us and all of us. We celebrate the touch of the waters, the vibrations of God’s word,... the gifts of the Spirit that embrace and enliven our whole person, body, mind and spirit and our communities of faith” that walk with us, who lift us up in prayer, who guide us, and who love us.

“Baptism celebrates what has already been done.” We have been claimed and named by God. “Baptism claims a blessing that is already ours...Baptism is our celebration of the presence of God’s grace that has been there all along.” Baptism is our visible sign of invisible grace. Baptism is that moment when we claim and own our relationship with God.

Baptism is when we experience the “all inclusive embrace of God” and know that we are transformed and called to share this all inclusive embrace with all of God’s children.

We are all on this journey together and what matters is what happens when we emerge from that water. What matters is that moment where we recognize, embrace and celebrate that we are claimed and named by God who was with us in the beginning, who is with us now, and who will be there for us always

As we emerge from the waters, as we feel the waters on our foreheads, as we feel the waters roll down, we are reminded of God’s promises. We are reminded that God’s justice will roll down like water and wash every thing a new. We are reminded that in the beginning, God moved over the waters and created life. We are reminded that God calls us to lay down beside still cool waters and find rest and restore our souls.

When we feel the waters on our foreheads, like tears of joy, we will remember that we are claimed and named. And we will remember that we have been transformed and that our lives are called to blessings for others.

Because that is what matters for the author of Luke. That moment we emerge from the waters and begin to live a life based on the principles of the Kingdom of God. In that moment, where we claim our relationship with God. In that moment, where we understand that this world does not the last word.

In just a few moments, you will be invited to come forward and remember your baptism. Remember the details of that day. Remember emerging from that water. And to remember what happened after your baptism.

Remember your call as one of God’s children to bring hope and grace to all that are hurting.

Remember you call as one of God’s servants to support those around you on their journey.

remember your call to pray for one another and to pray to nourish your spirit. Remember that you are blessed through the Holy Spirit to renew, to refresh, to inspire those around you.

May we always remember the covenant of our baptism. Amen.