

First Presbyterian Church
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Baptism of Jesus – January 10, 2016
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The baptism of Jesus is found in all four gospels, and each gospel writer emphasizes certain points of the event. In Luke's account there is no interaction between John and Jesus at all, unlike what we find in the baptism stories of the other gospels. It is as if Luke wants us to be sure that the ministry of John, the ministry of preparation, is now over. John had come to prepare the people for the coming Messiah, and now his goal has been accomplished. Suddenly there is a new focus, a new ministry. One story ends, another begins. And unlike the other the other gospels, Luke's account states that a group of people had been baptized and Jesus had been one of them. This point is presented almost as an afterthought. And the baptism itself isn't the focus of this passage. For Luke, what comes immediately after is what is important.

Following his baptism, Luke tells us that Jesus is praying. Prayer is a very important part of the life of Jesus. Throughout the gospels Jesus is presented as one who prays often, especially right before critical moments in his life. He prays before choosing and sending out his disciples. He prays before he performs acts of healing and exorcism. He prays that the Holy Spirit would come to his disciples. He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. He prays while he is on the cross. And here in this passage, he his praying before his ministry begins. For him, prayer is part of the preparation for the important parts of his life. Prayer is his conversation with God, connecting him with God and giving him focus.

We would do well to emulate this model he has given to us. We all face times of change in our lives and prayer is an excellent way of facing those changes. Whether we are experiencing times of turmoil or of joy, prayer can help us to prepare ourselves for what is to come. A new job, a new relationship, a new place of residence, or any life altering situations. Any time we are faced with a new or different circumstance in our life, prayer can aid in the transition process. As we express to God our fears and expectations, we open ourselves to hearing God's loving response to our needs. Many times also, we may be unsure of how to proceed. Again prayer can prepare for what is to come by opening our minds and hearts to God's will for our lives. God gives us signs

to look for, not in blazing neon, but when we focus on God, often the path forward becomes clearer. Jesus was well aware of this, and so he made prayer an important part of his life.

For Jesus, the ministry of John the Baptist was the sign for him to get up and to get moving. So he came, as part of the crowds, and was baptized. His baptism signaled a point of transition in his life, a transition that would in fact, impact the whole world and all of humanity. Luke describes three things that occurred following the baptism and while he was praying.

The first thing that occurred was that heavens opened. This is a reference to the prayer of Isaiah found in the Book of Isaiah chapter 64:1-4. It reads "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when the fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, nor ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him." Isaiah's prayer was for God to come again, as God had done during the Exodus, this coming would be the dawn of a new exodus, a new age. So after the baptism of Jesus, the opening of heaven signified the dawning of this new age with Jesus as the Messiah whose coming had been foretold. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God's power and mercy is about to be revealed.

The second thing that occurs following Jesus' baptism was the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus in the form of something like a dove. If we jump ahead to the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is in the synagogue and he quotes a passage from Isaiah 61, proclaiming to his hearers "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." It was the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus following his baptism that marked the beginning of his ministry, both commissioning and empowering him to live out his calling. This same spirit Jesus will give as a gift to his followers in order to enable his church to live out its ministry of witness and service to him.

The third occurrence following the baptism of Jesus is the announcement to him from a voice from heaven. In the gospel of Luke, the words proclaimed by the voice are specifically addressed to Jesus so it is uncertain if only he heard it or if it were audible to those around him as well. The voice proclaimed, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." There are two Old Testament references combined in this proclamation. The first reference comes from Psalm 2:7 which reads, "I will tell of the decree of the Lord; he said to me 'you are my son, today I have begotten you.'" This psalm was used at the coronations of Israel's kings. The kings of Israel were seen as the sons of God, and as Jesus is from the line of King David, part of his Messianic role is that of King. We have already heard other references to the sonship of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. In chapter 1 the angel Gabriel proclaimed to Mary that Jesus would be the son of the Most High. Another reference was made by Jesus himself at age 12 while he was in the Temple, when he asked Mary, "Did you not know I would be in my Father's house?"

The second Old Testament reference from the statement made by the heavenly voice comes again from the book of Isaiah 42:1. This reference is to the servant of the Lord and it reads "here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." This is the second part of Jesus' Messianic role, that of servant. He is both King and servant. But first and foremost, he is the Son who is dearly loved by the Father. And it is this relationship, this aspect of God that Jesus shows to us, his disciples. More than anything else, God's loves for us, as exhibited through the Son Jesus Christ, is truly a glorious gift, and is also beyond our comprehension.

And that is the story of Jesus' baptism. For him, it was the signal to begin his ministry. For years he had served as the obedient son to his earthly parents, Mary and Joseph. He grew in wisdom and stature. He prepared himself to receive his calling. He waited patiently for the moment he knew would arrive. And when his cousin John came out of the wilderness, the last of the Old Testament style prophets, preaching repentance and preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus stepped forward and accepted his calling. It changed his life. And it certainly changed all of ours.

Sometimes changes are anticipated; sometimes they come upon us without warning. But either way, at the moment of change, a completely new path is put before us. We all have these moments in our own lives. They may not be as momentous as what Jesus faced at the moment of his baptism, but we all have and will continue to experience moments where the course of our lives could change forever. We may not know which way to turn, but Jesus has given us a few pointers along the way. First there is prayer. Prayer calms our minds and hearts. Prayer opens us to the leading of God. Prayer helps to prepare us for whatever may come. We have been told to pray without ceasing, to live our lives as one extended prayer to God.

Second, there are signs along the way. The heavens may not open up above us. A voice might not come down to us out of the clouds, but as followers of Jesus, we know what is expected of us as his disciples. If we live our lives following the two greatest commandments, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves, we will never veer too far off course. He has told us what is good. He has told us what is right. And if we do what he has told us to do, we will see the signposts along the way.

Third, Christ has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers us to forge ahead in ministry to the world. The Spirit comforts us when we face tragedy. The Spirit rejoices with us when we experience great joy. The Spirit provides to us peace, to live in harmony with others and face each new day and experience each new moment, one at a time.

And finally, Jesus has shown us the great love of the Father. Nothing on earth can ever separate us from the love of God. No person. No place. No situation. Jesus Christ has given us the greatest gift of all, the privilege of becoming sons and daughters of God the Father. Sons and daughters who are greatly loved, and to whom infinite grace and mercy have been given.