

The Baptism of Jesus
Luke 3:15-22
Baptism of the Lord, Year C January 12, 2024
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends. As we enter into this church season after the Epiphany—a time when we will see how the identity of Jesus is made known in different ways to different people—let’s recognize that one way we can reveal his identity to the world is by watching over one another in love. We can do that as we honor and care for our neighbors. These folks may not look like us, talk like us, eat like us, or share our culture. But, whoever they are, they are God’s beloved children, just as we are. How we treat others says a great deal about our relationship with Jesus. Let’s recommit ourselves “to serve God by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.” If we do, we may be overwhelmed by the blessing that God pours out!

Turning to today’s Gospel lesson from Luke 3, you may be thinking that this passage has a familiar ring to it. And you’re right! Extra credit for you today! On the Third Sunday of Advent (December 15) we explored Luke 3:7-18. Our focus then was on John the Baptist and his message. Today, we are looking at Luke 3:15-22. The lectionary reading omits verses 18-20, but I’m including them and will explain why when we get there.

As today’s scene opens in verse 15, we see a crowd questioning whether John might be the Messiah. They are expectantly waiting for the one who is to come. John doesn’t answer with a simple “no,” but instead explains that he baptizes with water but that the Messiah “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:16). We know that John’s prophetic words come to fruition on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit falls on another crowd that was gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-4). John not only speaks of the baptism Jesus will bring but he also “proclaimed the good news to the people” (3:18). The next thing that Luke reports is that John has been imprisoned because he dared to challenge King Herod’s relationship with his brother’s wife, and because Herod had also done many evil things. This information doesn’t make it into our lectionary reading, so we have to ask why. The obvious answer is that in the account of Jesus’ baptism in Matthew (3:13-17) and Mark (1:9-11), as well as John the Baptist’s testimony in the Gospel of John (1:29-34) it is John who baptizes Jesus. The way Luke recounts the story, though, John was already in Herod’s prison (Luke 3:20) when Jesus is baptized (3:21). There, it sounds as if Jesus is one among many who have come to be baptized.

I imagine some of you are asking, “so did John baptize Jesus, or didn’t he?” And if he did, why does Luke say that John is already in prison? For me, that’s the important question, and here’s why. John had a large band of disciples, some of whom did remain loyal to him after Jesus began his ministry. For Luke, it’s important to get John out of the spotlight. Of course, if he is in prison, he is out of the spotlight and off the stage completely! His absence allows the focus to be squarely upon Jesus. Luke wants us to be aware of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah.

I think that scholar Fred Craddock’s observation that Luke pays little attention to the act of baptism itself because he wants to highlight “the postbaptismal revelatory character of Jesus’ experience” is noteworthy (*Luke, Interpretation Series*, page 51). That’s certainly a mouthful. But Dr. Craddock is helpful in dividing this experience into three parts, which we may want to think of as three acts in a play.

In Act 1, “the heaven was opened” (3:21). We often speak of the heavens opening and rain

or snow gushing forth. But here, we are to recall the prayer of Isaiah 64:1-4 that begins, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The prophet is calling for a new exodus and a new age. Jesus' presence certainly signifies that a new age is beginning. We Christians believe that in him, the kingdom of God has begun to come on earth. It is here, now, though not in all its fullness...yet. That's why we await his second coming.

Act 2 depicts the Holy Spirit coming down upon Jesus in a form like a dove (3:22). So here, Jesus is being empowered for his ministry. And it is the same Holy Spirit who will later empower the disciples and the early church to bear witness to Jesus and serve others in his name (Acts 1:1-4). The use of the dove here is interesting. We associate this bird with peace, but in ancient literature birds were associated with divine choice. Could it be that the dove is signifying to the crowd that Jesus was chosen by God?

In the third act, a voice from heaven reveals that Jesus is God's Beloved son, who pleases his Father (3:22). Both here and in Mark 1:11, the voice says "you are." In contrast, in Matthew 3:17 the voice says "this is." So, in one Gospel the voice is heard by the crowd, but in two others God is speaking privately to Jesus. That distinction may help explain why Luke is careful to note that the dove appeared "in bodily form" (3:22). People would not have heard God's voice but they could have seen this bird, whose appearance signified a divine choice.

So, Luke 3:22 reveals that Jesus is God's Son, that he is beloved, and that God is well pleased with him, which likely implies that the Son obeys his Father. Moreover, these words combine words likely used at the coronation of a king from Psalm 2:7 ("You are my son; today I have begotten you") with the description of God's suffering servant in Isaiah 42:1 ("Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him). As Dr. Craddock points out, putting these two biblical texts together "join sovereignty and service" (page 51). Thus, Jesus is the servant-king.

There's something else very important in Luke's brief passage that we should also note: Jesus was praying (3:21) when heaven opened and God spoke! I find that very significant. As we'll see throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is often in prayer. In 5:16, for example, we're told that Jesus had been preaching and healing crowds, and he also "would withdraw to deserted places and pray." Similarly, just before he called his disciples, Jesus "went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God" (6:12). He was praying when he was transfigured in front of three of his disciples (9:29). He prayed on the Mount of Olives just before he was betrayed (22:39-46), and he prayed at the moment of his death (23:46). As he predicted Peter's threefold denial, he said to the apostle, "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (22:32). And we of course know that Jesus taught his disciples to pray those precious words that we have come to call the Lord's Prayer (11:1).

In addition to the emphasis on prayer in this passage, we also see the major role that the Holy Spirit plays. On one hand, the Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism; on the other, it is Jesus who will baptize with the Spirit (3:22, 16). In verses 21-22, we're shown a picture of the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Having said that, recall that a doctrine of the Trinity was not finalized until the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

At this point, I usually ask, so what? What does all this mean for how I live my life? What does it mean for my relationship with Jesus that I pray and am aware of Holy Spirit working in my life? We can also make a connection between Jesus' baptism and our baptism. Baptism is

very important, since it is one of only two sacraments recognized by The United Methodist Church. For us, this is an unrepeatable act, though we can remember it at any time.

But especially in the context of the week after the Epiphany, I think this passage is crucial for our relationship with Jesus, because it shows us his relationship with the Father. We see this important aspect of his identity. He is the obedient, prayerful, beloved Child, who is ready and willing to serve the Father. Even without the great drama that we see in Luke 3, can you say that you too are ready and willing to serve God?

May I suggest that on our own, we likely cannot say “yes” to God. But notice that even the incarnate Jesus, who we believe to be both truly human and truly divine, had to pray at his baptism before he was sent out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He returned to Galilee and only then was he spiritually prepared to begin his ministry (Luke 4:1-15). Luke 4:1 and 14 both say that he was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it seems as if we’ve pushed the act of baptism to the background. Matthew Skinner (*Connections, Year C, Volume 1, pages 174-175*) points out that Luke doesn’t draw much attention to the baptism itself. Instead:

This passage’s emphasis falls on what occurs subsequently: the opening of heaven, the Spirit’s arrival, and a declaration from God. These pivotal events happen separately from the baptism...when Jesus prays. Prayer, according to Luke-Acts, creates a context in which people receive divine guidance or find themselves cooperating with God’s work...As Jesus prays presumably alone...God addresses him, confirming his identity as God’s beloved Son. In the aftermath of his baptism, Jesus discovers who he is. Actually, he rediscovers this knowledge, along with Luke’s readers (135; 2:49). The divine words confirm truth that has already been declared.

Jesus therefore does not commence his ministry until first he is told again who he is and to whom, he belongs. His ministry thus exists as a prolonged expression of his identity as God’s chosen and sent agent.

Jesus’ words and deeds are rooted in prayer and supported by the power of the Holy Spirit. And, as his followers, our words and deeds are also rooted in prayer and guided by the Holy Spirit. Or are they? How many times have you heard people say, “I’m so busy that I don’t have time to pray”? Maybe you’ve even said that yourself. But consider how important prayer really is. John Wesley taught that “God does nothing except in response to believing prayer.” Wesley was keenly aware of the need for prayer, so much so that he rose at 4 a.m. and is said to have prayed for two hours each day. Wesley prayed a lot because he believed “prayer is where the action is.” Wesley was clearly on the same page as Jesus when it comes to prayer.

The question we need to ask ourselves is, what page are we on? To answer that, we need to ask first, what is prayer? I think it’s fair to say that for many, prayer is simply a recital of a laundry list of needs and wants, either for others or for oneself. When that’s the case, prayers that do not yield our desired results lead us to believe that prayer really doesn’t “work.” Please don’t misunderstand me: I very much believe in intercessory prayer, though I recognize that God’s will, not mine, is to be done. But beyond heartfelt intercessions, I think we also need to recognize that prayer is two-way communication in which we can worship, praise, and give thanks to God, and more importantly, we can listen. Just as it is difficult to build solid relationships with other people without listening to them, so it is that we cannot be closely

connected to God unless we are willing to listen to what he has to say to us. As we pray in this way, we strengthen our relationship with the Father, as Jesus did.

The Bible doesn't tell us just what Jesus was praying when heaven opened at the time of his baptism. His ministry hadn't officially begun yet, so I have to wonder if he was praying for guidance: "What do you want me to do, Father?" This is a page I'm often on! You've likely heard that still, small voice within, just as I have, nudging you in a particular direction. The voice Jesus heard, though not audible to the crowd in Luke, was surely clear and definitive. He was the Beloved Son. That was the identity revealed to him and to us.

As we begin this new year, perhaps we need to consider our own identity. We, too, have been baptized and are God's beloved child. How does God see us? How is God speaking to us? What is the message? And how are we to respond? Jesus did what he needed to do, and he kept praying for guidance throughout his life. Pray that God might reveal to you something new about yourself...who you are and what you are being called to do at this time. John Wesley taught us:

Prayer is certainly the grand means of drawing near to God, and all other means are helpful to us only so far as they are mixed with, or prepare us for, this. (*How to Pray: The Best of John Wesley on Prayer*, page 70).

I'd like to challenge all of us—myself included—to be more focused on our prayer lives in 2025. After Easter, I'd like us to consider doing a weekday Bible study on prayer. Let's seal our intention by closing with Wesley's well-known Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen. (UMH, page 607) Nan