

Sermon for Sunday, January 12, 2025

Luke 3:1-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Luke, the gospel writer, is a master storyteller. In the opening lines of this gospel he specifically says that he investigated the stories of Jesus' life so as to put together this narrative. Clearly from Luke's perspective there was a link between John the Baptizer's work and Jesus' ministry; an overlap that Luke felt was important enough to describe in detail. Luke achieves this goal by telling us about John's baptismal ministry and his calls for repentance. It is striking that notification of Jesus' baptism is almost an afterthought: an "Oh by the way, Jesus was baptized." Type of detail.

While all the gospels bear witness to Jesus being baptized, baptism was not a routine part of Jewish practice then and is not now. There are rites of ritual immersion but Jewish people do not call them baptisms. The primary purpose of these rites was to signify the end of a phase or an event of a person's life or the beginning of a new one. You will understand this point more clearly later in this sermon.

Returning now to John. Somewhere along the line in John the Baptizer's life he incorporated the full immersion of people into his call to repentance. Scholars guess that John may have been influenced by a Jewish sect called the Essenes. (You'll have to look that one up to find out more information.) Scholars think that the Essenes practiced immersion, perhaps as an initiation rite. If John was an Essene he would naturally regard immersion as a sign of repentance: that he thought of the ritual as an act signifying one's desire to turn away from non-godly ways of living toward more godly ways.

John speaks pretty harshly to his audience. The most important point being, don't take your position as a "child of Abraham" as your ticket to God's blessings and God's love. Said another way, "Your genealogical lineage does not guarantee your position as one of God's chosen people." These harsh words shook up his audience and caused them to ask: What do I do now? How then should I live? John has pretty simple answers:

- If you have two coats, give one away to someone who has none. If you have extra food, share it. Friends, we live in an

affluent society. We have lots of stuff, perhaps even too much stuff. John says simply, recognize the abundance that you have and give away the excess. [Let's be honest folks, 10s of 1000s of homes have been wiped off the map near Los Angeles. Do we really need all of our stuff when their loss and subsequent need is so great?

- John's directive to tax collectors (who were likely charging excess taxes) was to collect only that which was required of them.
- John's words to soldiers were similar. Don't extort money from anyone by exercising your military power over them. Be satisfied with your wages.... Trust that your salary will be enough.
- It occurs to me that John has a pretty diverse audience. Crowds of people, some of whom are comfortable enough to have two sets of garments or excess food. He has tax collectors listening to him. (We will hear the story of Zaccheus later.) He even has soldiers, likely Roman soldiers, paying attention to his words. Even though he is harsh, people are willing to listen.
- John's call to the crowds of people was a call to generosity and compassion. His call was to the affluent, pointing out to them the generosity of God and challenging them to take their excess and give it away.

With that we come to those last two verses... Luke 3:21-22 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Luke's report of Jesus' baptism is pretty concise. He includes just a few details about the event: one being simply that Jesus was baptized and another being that a voice from heaven spoke and claimed Jesus as Son.

"When Jesus also had been baptized." Let's talk now about baptism. At that moment in history the Christian church did not exist. Baptism as a rite of initiation into the Christian church will occur pretty quickly after Jesus' death and resurrection, but it hasn't been established yet.

At that moment baptism had two purposes. The first was reminiscent of the Jewish practices that I described earlier. When an event or a phase of life was complete, you would take a ritual bath to signify that this event was over and done. You and your life

were moving on. The second purpose, coming from John the Baptizer was to signal repentance. Through it a person would recognize that they have left a path of living in a God-honoring manner and now intend to return to that path....in effect repenting. And if you think about it for a minute you can see how these two purposes are tied together.

Jesus being baptized is most likely his way of signaling that he is leaving his old way of life and that his work of ministry is about to begin. You might remember that last week's Scripture reading was about Jesus at the Temple at age 12 and that we have no stories of his life from age 12 to age 30....a span of 18 years. I dared to speculate that he was at home working with his father and siblings and supporting his family. His baptism as noted in today's Scripture reading is the Jewish ritual that he participates in as he shifts his life into his work of ministry.

As a side note Luke told us in verse 20 that John was imprisoned by Herod. John has now lost his audience. He can no longer proclaim, exhort, or preach to the crowds. Who is it that steps in to fill the need and continue calling people to repent? Jesus. Master storyteller Luke has now moved the focus from John to the ministry of Jesus where it will remain for the rest of the gospel.

With that I want to talk about baptism for a few moments. We teach that there are two sacraments. Baptism and Holy Communion. We also teach that in order for a sacrament to BE a sacrament it needs two things: first the word of God indicating that an action should be taken and second it needs an earthly element. Baptism fulfills these two requirements. The command from Jesus is in Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," The earthly element is ???

If you turn now to page 1165 in the back of the ELW you will find Martin Luther's teaching on baptism from the small catechism. I wish to draw your attention to the middle of the page where the Roman numeral IV is printed. *(Pause)* Luther writes "*What then is the significance of such a baptism with water?* It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and *through repentance* and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Luther recognizes that we humans are pulled by the many forces of this world in directions that take us away from God's way of living.

In effect that's what John the Baptizer was recognizing in his call to repentance. The tug away from God's way of living still happens, even today. But one of the promises of baptism is that we are claimed by God and called sons and daughters of God. We are the beloved of God. In that claiming God recognizes our human nature and how easy it is for us to turn away from the path of godly living that we are called to walk upon. We accumulate too much stuff. We allow greed to control us and strive to save every penny. If by chance we find ourselves in a position of power we allow that position to take over our lives and dominate others to their harm.

Remembering our baptism with a splash of water is intended to turn us back onto God's path of righteous living, God's path of generosity, God's path of mercy and compassion. It isn't easy folks. The world we live in is a broken place. We are constantly bombarded with messages pulling us in the opposite direction of God's way. Remembering our baptism helps us to remember who we are and whose we are. We are God's children, called to live as lights in the darkness of this world. Amen