

**The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
9 January 2022**

Luke 3:15-22

I haven't started any recent sermons with a good joke, so why change a good thing? Here is a silly joke instead: John, an alcoholic, went to the church to find a solution for his drinking problems. The priest, after a long talk, asked him: "Are you baptized?" "No," answered John. "Very well, then," said the priest. "I will give you the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and you will be a new man." The priest plunged John 3 times in the water and said: "You are now a new creature! There will be no more alcohol in your life! You're not John anymore. From today on, you will be known as Joseph. You are a new, clean, and healthy man!" Joseph found the whole thing odd, but he really liked the experience. When he got home, he went directly to the refrigerator, took out a beer, and dipped it in water, saying: "You are now a new creature! You are not beer anymore; you are now orange juice!"

The Epiphany Season begins on the first Sunday in January and ends with the Feast of the Transfiguration, just before the start of Lent. The Sunday after the visit of the Magi to the Holy Family (which we traditionally call Epiphany) is known as the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. So, the season starts with baptism and ends with transfiguration, which act as the bookends of this liturgical time. As I compare both events in the Gospel of Luke, I see incredible similarities. The very beginning and the very end of this time of "making known" (Epiphany) have the same sequence of events: 1. The skies are opened, 2. The voice of God thunders, "You are my beloved one, in you I am well pleased," and 3. A new mission or journey begins immediately after the event. The journey at baptism is the beginning of Jesus ministry. The journey after transfiguration is the beginning of Jesus' walk to Jerusalem, where he will die. It would appear that for the Gospels, being the beloved son of God means being thrust into service, which will lead to death. Perhaps this makes God's affirmation of his son the most appropriate and necessary.

The mission ahead after both events will be difficult, and it will lead to the cross. Christ, the obedient one, pleases his father by willingly accepting these missions. The affirmation, "You are my beloved" comes before his public ministry starts and before the passion in Jerusalem begins. The affirmation "You are my beloved" is not attached to the Son's actions. God's acceptance and love for his son has always been and will always be. It is his identity as the "Son of God" that makes Jesus the "Beloved," and not his actions. We know that his action of obedience to the Father "even to death on a cross" is found well-pleasing by God, but God's love for his Son begins before his mission for the world.

Luke gives us a few important facts in the passage today: (a) The people are filled with expectation, which means they eagerly await the coming of the Messiah, (b) They

“question in their hearts about John,” which means that they wonder if he is the Messiah, (c) John makes it clear that he is not the Messiah. He gives them a few reasons why the Messiah is superior: “1. The Messiah is more powerful than I am. 2. My baptism is different to his baptism. Mine is with water for repentance, his is with the Holy Spirit and fire (for the forgiveness of sins.) 3. He is the one who clears the threshing floor and separates the wheat from the chaff, and he is the one who determines what happens to both the wheat and the chaff.”

There is a break in our Lectionary when it comes to the baptism of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. We see an uninterrupted narrative in Matthew (3:13-17) and Mark (1:4-11.) But the lectionary takes a break in Luke. We are not given verses 18-21, as the reading jumps directly to verse 22 with the statement about Jesus’ baptism. I find those three verses significant. Luke says that “With many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod, the ruler who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.” When you read the passage as it is given to us today, it would appear as though Jesus is baptized by John and immediately the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus with the heavenly proclamation. But when you add the 3 verses that are omitted, you get a different story. Jesus is baptized with the people, we presume by John, then John the Baptist is arrested by Herod and placed in jail. It is sometime after John’s arrest, while Jesus is in prayer, that the heavens are opened, and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and makes the famous proclamation. This is a different sequence than Mark and Matthew, both of whom present the heavenly apparition and testimony at the time of baptism.

In Luke’s case, the emphasis is not so much on the baptism event, but rather, on the coming of the Holy Spirit as Jesus is in prayer at some point after the baptism. For Luke, time could be divided into 3 different stages: (a) The time of the prophets which ends with John the Baptist; (b) The time of Jesus, the Messiah, who filled by the Holy Spirit, preaches the Good News of God’s kingdom, gathers a group of followers, undergoes suffering and death, rises from the dead, and ascends to heaven; (c) The age of the Holy Spirit who builds a church, gives testimony about the son, and commissions this Church to go out to the ends of the world in mission. Another way to say this is that in Luke we have the age of the Old Testament, the age of Christ, and the age of the Church.

We live in the age of the Church, or most specifically, in the age of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that Christ is not among us anymore, what it means is that Christ’s spiritual presence among us can only be seen and felt through the intervention of His Holy Spirit. It is this Holy Spirit who gives testimony about Christ and who reminds us daily of the one to whom we belong, the one who paid the price to ransom us and make us free. We no longer see Jesus in his physical form in the way the disciples and apostles saw him. That age is past. In this new age, we only see Jesus as the Holy Spirit reveals him to us. This revelation comes primarily from Holy Scripture and prayer, but it also includes an element of commissioning for ministry that comes through our baptism.

Many of us forget that we live in this third age, the age of the Holy Spirit. We do a good job learning about Jesus, but we forget about the Holy Spirit. It is right to learn as much as we can about Jesus, after all, everything about Holy Scripture points to him and becomes fulfilled in him. But we cannot forget that there is more to Jesus than history. There is more to Jesus than the thirty-three years he lived on this earth. Jesus as the Christ has always been and will always be. He is here today, but we can only see him if we allow his Holy Spirit to reveal him to us. The Holy Spirit gives daily testimony about the Son of God, but we can only hear this testimony if we are willing to listen to the Spirit. The problem, as I see it, is that we are so afraid to be seen as “Pentecostals,” “Charismatics,” or “Enthusiasts” that we purposely ignore the mighty ways in which God’s Holy Spirit leads us into a deeper relationship with God’s Son.

Today, Luke reminds us that there is nothing we can do without God’s Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who rests upon us and declares us “Children of God” and “Beloved.” It is God’s Holy Spirit who commissions us for ministry in our communities and in our world. But, let me be clear when I say that God’s approval and love of us precedes any act of commissioning. At our own baptisms, which for most of us took place as infants, God made us his own and declared us “beloved,” not because we had done anything to deserve this classification, and not because we were righteous. This acceptance and commissioning were gifts freely given out of his abundant mercy and his generous grace, before we were able to do anything good for God! To be the beloved means that we are set-apart for ministry: we are sanctified, we are consecrated to his service, and we are sent-out to love and serve him to the ends of the world. This is what it means to be baptized into Christ. As baptized believers, we engage in mission, but it is important to know that we don’t go out as people seeking our own redemption. Rather, we go out as redeemed people seeking to share our faith and love with those who don’t know Christ. The mission field is anywhere there are men and women who don’t know Christ as their Savior, and anywhere Christ is not relevant in people’s lives. The mission field is both here and out there, but without the “out there” our mission is incomplete and self-serving.

I pray that each of us will choose to welcome God’s Holy Spirit into our lives today and that we will let God use us in his Kingdom in mighty ways. He is alive, he is with us, and he sends us out to be his feet and hands in a hurting world. Today, as we reaffirm our baptismal vows, I pray that you will pay close attention to those promises you will make. I pray that you will leave this building filled with God’s Holy Spirit and ready to live out your baptism daily. Amen!