

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Luke 3:15-22

I've been a pastor for almost 37 years now and in the course of those years I've had the privilege of baptizing hundreds of people – people of all ages, shapes, colors and sizes. Most of the adults or at least the parents of children who were being baptized seemed to have a pretty good handle on the why and what and how of it all but a few of them didn't seem to have the foggiest idea. Of course, I tried to help them understand and appreciate this Sacrament called baptism but, you know something, I'm not sure how successful I was.

I remember one couple in particular who weren't members of the parish I was serving at the time who called me one day about having their little daughter baptized. They had had just enough contact with the church to feel that they should have her baptized but not enough to really know why. I said I would be glad to baptize their daughter – I've never refused anyone baptism – but I would like to meet with them first so that we could talk about this business of baptism. We met twice. We looked at what the Bible had to say and we talked about what it would mean not only for their child but also what it would mean for them as the parents of a baptized child. Finally it came time for the baptism. After the service, the mother said something that has stayed with me to this day. She said, "Is that all there is? I mean, isn't there something more? I guess I kinda expected something more." I tried to explain to her that what had just happened wasn't to be judged by how long it took or how complex it was but rather by what God had simply and beautifully done in her child and, in that, with her and her husband's help, what God still planned to do in the future – that with the proper spiritual care, what God had done would become clear and would, in the end, be more than she ever would have expected.

And, you know, the more I think about it the more I realize that everyone, whether members of a church or not, has certain expectations when it comes to these kinds of things. We want every worship service to be a mountaintop experience – we want every sermon to be the best we've ever heard --we want every communion to be a time to remember – we want every baptism to be marked with lights and bells and the singing of angels. Unfortunately, most worship services, most sermons, most communions, most baptisms aren't like that – not like that at all. Most of them seem pretty ordinary and mundane, and, in that, pretty disappointing.

Or so it would seem at the time. But the fact is that we need to look at these things over the long haul. The blessings of worship or of a sermon or of communion or of baptism are not so much seen at the moment as they are in the living out of them in our lives day to day. But if we are to see those blessings we must persevere – we must worship faithfully, we must listen intently, we must commune regularly and we must remember our baptism every day. Unfortunately, there are always those who come to services and are not impressed, who listen but get nothing out of it, who come to communion and are not moved, who are baptized and are not changed – and they give up.

Not so Jesus. His baptism is recorded in our Gospel lesson for today. And while, in one way, it was undoubtedly spectacular, it was, in another way, also mundane. After all, plenty of other

people were being baptized by John too. It was only in the long run that he or anyone else could see what it all meant not only for him but for the whole world. In fact, it was only after three long years of ministry and service, of suffering and death and resurrection, that we see the blessings of that baptism.

Looking back, it was in his baptism that we see Jesus identifying with sinners like us – for even though he himself was sinless, he bears the sins of the world. Looking back, it was in that baptism we see him identified as the very Son of God – not in power but in humility, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. And looking back, it was in his baptism we see him anointed with the Spirit from on high for the purpose of carrying out the God-given mission and ministry he was born for – a mission and ministry of redemption, reconciliation and restoration. But we see this only as he lived it out over the long haul.

And I would remind you today that it's only as we live out our lives in him over the long haul that, by grace through faith, we understand and appreciate what it means to have been baptized into him – that in our baptism we were identified with him and the blessings and benefits of forgiveness, life and salvation were made ours – that in baptism we were made the very children of God and members of His kingdom forever – that in baptism we were anointed with the Holy Spirit for a mission and a ministry in Christ's name. But only as we live as those forgiven children of God doing those things he has called us to do will we find our baptism to be more and to mean more than we ever expected – in fact, as we live out our baptism every day we find that it was and will always be the most important thing, not that we have done, but that God has done for us, in our whole lives – for, in the end, baptism gives us our identity and it gives us our meaning and purpose in life and it gives us the focus and the direction and the power for living that life both in this world and in the world to come.

And so as we celebrate the baptism of our Lord this First Sunday after the Epiphany, we also celebrate our own.

I would ask all those who have been baptized to join me in reaffirming our baptism by participating in the short rite that is printed in the bulletin. And if you haven't been baptized, I would invite you to prayerfully consider being baptized. Let us stand.