

January 14, 2018 “Afraid, Amazed and Baptized” Luke 3:15-22
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So, with many other exhortations, he 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.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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.”

Martin Luther once said baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes a lifetime to fulfill. Baptism is not a once and done event; it is a threshold event we pass through, entering a new way of living, over and over again.

When young parents come to me to ask if I can baptize their baby, I can’t and don’t first off say yes or no. What I say is: “Can we talk about this?” (Isn’t that the Presbyterian way?)

No- we don’t do private, family baptisms for a number of reasons. It’s not the way it happened for Jesus or the Jewish people of his day, for starters, though that’s not the most important part of the conversation.

Baptism is part of a three way, corporate, covenant promise. Baptism is between God, the family and the congregation. We ask parents to raise their children in the faith, and we ask you- the congregation, to support them in so doing, with faith that God will be supporting us all, all along the journey.

It takes a community of faith, and often more than one, to help fulfill one’s baptism, and it is only accomplished one day of living at a time.

It's been that way since the beginning. Baptism has never been an individual experience alone. It's a rite of passage for all, journeying together in common life, which also points out something about us, as the church, that we don't so much talk about, but is very real and true.

Being a part of the Body of Christ in the church makes us a distinct group of people- really; called by God, gathered up by God's Spirit.

The church does not elect it's members, carefully selecting them from a certain pool of the population, like Rotary, Lions or the Elks Club. We are not Masons, picked out by a select recruiting committee. We're not picked by a group of people who think that we'll fit in well together, or because certain folks think that you might have some special gift or skill to offer us, or that you might fit the mold of some preconceived ideal. No- not at all.

We are here because, somehow, God called us to be here; and we are here from more places than we could ever have been if there was a selection committee trying to do this.

So, constantly recognizing that it is God who calls us, rightly puts us in our place, allows us to recognize, accept and celebrate the differences we have- where we come from- and together seek to become the people and the church God intends us to be.

Which brings us back to baptism. After all, why did Jesus have himself baptized? If he knew he was the Messiah, then why do this- why submit to this? Why humble himself to have this done? [Is that a good question for today?]

If it wasn't repentance for the remission of sins; if that wasn't necessary for Jesus- then why did he submit to a public bath in the muddy waters of the Jordan river? The best reason I know is that God was calling Jesus to identify with others, to stand with them, to be numbered with common, everyday folk, sinners one and all.

Jesus submitted, very knowingly, to a rite of initiation for fallen, wayward people, particularly in the way that John the Baptist did it- in a very public, even counter-cultural way.

John's baptism- as he proclaimed it, was for repentance and for self-correction. To the tax collectors, he said to take no more than the assessment, to soldiers who asked (yes), no bullying, no blackmail, - do the right thing.

John walked the walk and talked the talk of God's beloved community on earth, but he knew that there would be another. When Jesus came to John, the definition of baptism changed. More than a rite of initiation of do's and don'ts, a list of correct things to perform and to avoid, baptism begins to be understood as a 'visible sign of an invisible grace.' By the loving mercy of

God, long after the baptismal waters have dried from our heads, we are continually upheld by God's grace.

It is said that Martin Luther, the German reformer whose quote began this sermon, was often himself plagued by a deep sense of unworthiness and doubt. This wasn't so much depression but rather a deep sense of insufficiency for the tasks at hand. To counter this, Luther kept an inscription over his desk that read, "Remember, you have been baptized." It was often remembered about him that while writing he would touch his forehead as if being baptized once again.

It's not a bad thing to do, sort of Ash Wednesday-like, reminding yourself that you are a child of God, cleansed and forgiven, claimed and sanctified, sealed by God's Spirit and given a new, everlasting identity in Christ's love.

Baptized or not baptized, you are a child of God- each of us, and all of us called by name. Here's a little story about what that looks like.

Back in 1976, as some of us remember, it was America's bicentennial year. A very creative writer came up with an intriguing idea. With the country now 200 years old, he thought, I wonder if I can find someone alive today who is old enough to remember someone who was then old enough to have been alive at the founding of the nation- a living link to the beginning of our national story. Get it?

And sure enough he found such a person. He was a Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford, who was just over 100 years old in 1976, and remembered when he was a little boy being taken by wagon to see his great-great-grandmother, who was then over 100 herself, and who was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first President. (Those were the days!) Do the math, it works... the first inauguration was in April 1789.

When the writer asked Burnham what he remembered about it, he said that he remembered being taken to his great-great-grandmother's house. She was feeble, she was blind. She was sitting in an old rocking chair in the corner of a dark bedroom.

"We brought Burnham to see you"" his father said. The old woman turned toward the sound, reached out with long, bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, "Bring him here."

"They had to push me toward her." Burnham remembered. "I was afraid of her. But when I got close to her, she reached out her hands and began to stroke my face... She felt around my

eyes, my nose, my mouth, my chin. And all at once, she seemed to be satisfied, and she pulled me close to her and held me tight.”

“This boy’s a Ledford,” she announced. “ I can feel it. I know this boy. He’s one of us.” It’s quite a story.

Now I told you that story in order to tell this story.

The account of the Burnham family took me back to a story of my own; specifically, of my Grandmother. I remember when I was in elementary school I would stay with Grammy Blair after school. Grammy Blair’s maiden name was Mueller, a pretty interesting name nowadays. Then it was just a good Pennsylvania Dutch name. It was on very cold winter days, after I’d walked to her house, that she would open the door, pull off my hat, and then yank on my ear. Not a Carol Burnet kind of gentle tug, but rather a real, hard yank. And then she would say, in her old Pennsylvania Dutch, “Du bist gut gemacht!” “Du bist gut gemacht.” You are made well.

When she said that, even though I really didn’t know what it meant at the time, i knew what she was saying. I knew it was something good about me, just for showing up. Just for being me. Then she’d have a good snack for me and all would be well. What a gift that was. I think that stern love and ultimate acceptance somehow sunk into me through the years, and I am grateful.

In a more lasting and much deeper way, baptism is all about God’s affirmation to each one of us, just for being who we are. A child of God. God says, “I know this one. I’ve called this one by name. This one belongs to me. Du bist gut gemacht.

Being loved by God is the most essential thing in our lives, now into eternity. It comes before all doing, and in fact, it is the source of all doing.

You are a living link to the love of God through baptism, each of us is a first generation Christian, called by the source of all life, everywhere.

Now, go ahead and do God’s calling. Amen

My baptism means that I am joined to Jesus Christ forever. As I am baptized with water, he baptizes me with his Spirit, washing away all my sins and freeing me from their control. My baptism is a sign that one day I will rise with him in glory, and may walk with him even now in newness of life.

(from the PCUSA Study Catechism, Question 56. on the meaning of Baptism)

