

Sermon: Epiphany I

Mr. Evans DeVries

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Year C

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The baptism of Christ marks the beginning of His public ministry, with the possible exception of the incident in Luke about Christ in the temple when he was 12 years old. Scholars place this in the Fall of 29 AD based on the time given: “in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberias as Caesar when Pontius Pilate was governor”.

John the Baptist or Baptizer’s ministry was prophesied in Isaiah as “the voice in the wilderness” who would smooth and make straight the road for the King. His ministry was one that called for repentance and baptism in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom that was at hand. It was so near, according to the Baptizer, that there was a profound sense of urgency to John’s message. The ax was already at the root of the tree, according to John. His message involved something new, however, to the Jewish community: baptism. Baptism as we know it, was not practiced by Jews prior to John, although ritual washing has a long held a place in Judaism. The Jews had the mikvah, or ritual bath that was used to cleanse the things which were seen as unclean: cooking utensils that had become contaminated according to the laws of Kosher, for example. It was also used on people who needed to be made clean, like gentiles wishing to convert to Judaism. The Jewish sect of the Essenes who lived at Qumran at the northwest end of the Dead Sea, and who were likely the keepers of the Dead Sea Scrolls also built fairly elaborate ritual baths. But to suggest that a Jew should be baptized as we know it was unheard of. So, John the Baptizer’s message was that Jews had turned so far away from God that they were now as far away from God as the gentiles. Inexorably, the kingdom of God was drawing very near. Nearer than even he knew. Baptism for John was to be the result of and a sign of repentance. As I prepared this piece for today, I borrowed heavily from David Lose, Past President of Lutheran

Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and Scott Hoezee from Calvin Theological Seminary's Center for Excellence in Preaching. These two commentators, especially, seem to have anticipated my questions as if they were reading my mind.

David Lose asks, "Did you ever wonder why mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians baptize infants whereas Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians baptize adults?" The reason, he says, is while both groups see baptism as a gift from God, most Christians, going back to the beginning of the church, place the dominant emphasis on God's unconditional promise to accept us as we are, adopt us into God's family and forgive us all our sins. Baptizing infants reminds everyone that all we can really do is receive God's love with gratitude and try to live the role to which we've been called. Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians focus more on our response to God's grace. The person baptized must accept this grace, must choose to be baptized. This is known as 'believer baptism'. There is a disconnect in operation here, according to Lose. He says, "countless surveys show that most mainline Protestants think that, counter to the Reformation cry that we are 'justified by grace through faith', we must actually do something in order to be saved." Since both groups emphasize in their teachings about baptism that it is God's work, the disconnect continues. When it comes to Jesus's baptism, it is interesting to note that both Scott Hoezee and David Lose point out that there is a question as to just who baptized Jesus. Our gospel passage for today omits two verses in the middle of the passage, verses 19 and 20. These verses say:

19. 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, 20. added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

That leaves the obvious question, that if John is in prison, who baptized Jesus? The answer to that question is the Holy Spirit who descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

There is another question that has troubled believers since the beginning of the church. If Jesus is without sin, why would he need John's baptism? David Lose offers and rejects the notion that Jesus was baptized not because he needed to be but rather to be like us. He also rejects the idea that Jesus's baptism offered forgiveness for original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve. Instead of those explanations, Lose prefers to focus on the idea that the primary purpose of baptism is to provide identity. When Jesus was baptized, God announced to Jesus that he was his son. In our baptism, we learn that we, too, are God's children. We are promised that we are loved and adopted as his children forever. Lose calls this the one relationship that is impossible to screw up. From our participation in this relationship, we gain a sense of our own identity. We learn who we are by knowing whose we are. Lose does admit to struggling with this question regarding baptism: Does baptism make us a part of God's family or does it "announce" to us that God includes us in His family? If it makes us a part of His family, then it becomes the "salvation vaccination", something we have to do to enter into the kingdom. That is in conflict with the belief that we are 'justified by grace through faith' but agrees with the popular belief that to be granted salvation we must do something.

Scott Hoezee didn't dwell so much on the technicalities of baptism. He dealt with the message that Luke's description of Jesus's baptism sends. He is struck by how understated Luke is in his description of the baptism as compared with his nativity narrative. He says of Luke's baptism story, "He mixes Jesus in with the larger crowd, tells us that Jesus was praying at some point, and then reports the descent of the Spirit but without giving us a single clue as to whether or not anyone other than Jesus witnessed this particular sign." He finishes his comments with this final summation.

"In this part of Luke 3, the Son of God in flesh came to be baptized. But Luke frames up the story right inside this real world, replete with all its unhappy events and apparent signs that chaos is in charge. Having made it clear in his first chapters that grand galactic events were afoot, Luke now throttles back a bit to remind us that faith finally

has to cling to God's plan in the teeth of a whole lot of things that are not going to be nearly as encouraging or obvious as angels dancing in the skies.

But take heart, Luke is saying by sounding this note of realism. Take heart: the Son of God came, the Spirit really did descend and the Father was "well pleased" with how the whole project was going. Take heart.

Take heart on all those days when your spirit is locked up in some prison or another. Take heart on all those days when Jesus is at best a face in the crowd and you just cannot quite pick out His presence in your life on a Thursday morning or a Monday afternoon. Take heart on all those days when all the wrong people seem to be wielding the axes and clearing various threshing floors even as God seems to be not nearly active enough.

Take heart. God has made his move. God is on the move. The Son is well pleasing to God because the Son has saved the world in a way no power, no prison, no disaster can touch. Reality is more than what you can see with your eyes, Luke is saying. So take heart.

Evans