

Draft

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Baptism of the Lord
January 13, 2019

Old Testament Lesson
Isaiah 43:1–7, 10

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 3:1-6, 15–18, 21–22 John baptizes Jesus; the Spirit descends; God says: You are my Son.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.” ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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.”

Proclamation and New Beginnings

In 2015, an unsuspecting historic Presbyterian congregation in Spartanburg County graciously received me to act as their temporary supply pastor prior to my ordination. Those good people allowed me to “hold down the fort” for two months at this same time on the church calendar. Although I had been a Ruling Elder for nearly 20 years and had completed all the requirements for ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, I had yet to receive a call for a particular congregation or ministry. This meant that another pastor within Foothills Presbytery had to serve as Moderator for their Session at each meeting. An ordained pastor had to preside at ordination and performing the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, or Lord’s supper.

The result of all that was that the day-to-day activities of the pastor were mine, along with planning and conducting the worship services and preaching each Sunday. This was challenging and interesting and a great experience which I appreciated very much. It was excellent preparation for my call to **transition ministry**, which developed during this time prior to ordination. One of the special Sundays during that time was the first Sunday after Epiphany, the Sunday in which we recognize the **Baptism of the Lord**, just as we are doing today. And, the text that day was very similar to our selection today from the lectionary, the guide pastors use that is designed to tell the story of the Gospel and the ministry of Jesus over the course of the church calendar each year. However, like today, there were some extra things going on.

We needed an ordained pastor for our service in order to examine a candidate for Ruling elder and to preside at the **ordination and installation** of the Ruling Elders for Session, and to preside over the Eucharist, the Lord's supper, which also fell on that day. As I was planning out the worship service that week, with so much going on, I wondered if we should solicit the congregation for a candidate for **baptism**, just to take advantage of our having an ordained pastor present for our worship service: This would allow us to complete a **trifecta** of duties that we had planned for that day.

Well, after planning this for quite some time, we all gathered for this special day of worship and celebration. The examination of our Ruling Elder candidate went well, but some last minute crises caused us to start our Session meeting late and the meeting went a little over the "estimated time." This pushed back the **worship service** some six to eight minutes, which made the organist and choir director a little "antsy." And, being the perfectionist that I am, I "overpacked" the **liturgy** for the ordination and the Eucharist, extending the service another few minutes. And, there were some rather awkward **silences** and pauses during the liturgy, as the visiting pastor and I went back and forth in our duties for both the ordination and the Lord's supper. The pastor and I smiled and laughed, and we said the prayers and **laid on hands** and **dispensed the elements** and prayed and blessed. And, somewhere in the middle of all of that I self-consciously preached a sermon that probably was too long and even more disconnected than what I deliver to all of you each week!

It was chaotic and fun; and, somewhere in the middle of it all I felt the **presence of God** as did many others that day. While that moment of being lifted up **spiritually** was very important, perhaps even necessary, we accomplished something else: We served the **needs** of that community of faith and its **ministry** and its mission and its **vision** of the church called by Christ. And that is significant in life of the church, because we often **serve God** in ways and actions just like this. We need special moments to gather for ordination and installation, as we did here last week. These moments offer us **insights** into the very reason for our gathering in worship. Doing that very act of **gathering**, praying, sharing **God's Word**, and proclaiming our **faith** all help to push us forward into the **uncertainty** that is living- living in the world, living in love, living in faith- living **in Christ**.

And, all that we do throughout the coming days and years and all that we will do today, all of it goes back to **a day in the wilderness** with a man named **John** proclaiming that something new and wondrous was coming.

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.

Luke 3:15-16 NRSV

A short time later, we find that **Jesus** went to be **baptized** by John. We do not receive a full explanation for this action by Jesus. There are lots of opinions, but few solid conclusions, except that this was a great moment which launched the **ministry** of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we know as Jesus Christ. This moment was very important to the disciples and the early church, because it is reported in **all four** of our Gospels: *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*. And, even skeptics will agree that, most likely, it was a real event, because we know that **John the Baptist** actually existed.

And, the emphasis of the story is not Jesus getting **washed clean**, because every witness during his lifetime consistently proclaimed that he had **no sin**. But, something far more important and significant followed the baptism:

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.”

Luke 3:21-22 NRSV

The emphasis of these passages is this: **God’s Spirit** was descending on Jesus. The waiting was over! The rabbis had told the Jewish people for centuries that God’s Spirit used to rest upon the prophets and, from them, it extended to the **people of Israel**. But, all the calamities of several hundred years made it seem that God withdrew all of that. To all present with Jesus and John that day, they felt that God’s presence would not come again until God’s Son returned.

The early church depended on those early disciples and preachers and evangelists and the writer of the *Gospel of Luke* to tell us that God entered into human history in a new and remarkable way. This sequence of actions, the baptisms and the descending Spirit of God, reaffirmed all of the preceding verses in the *Gospel of Luke*: extraordinary events which took place in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem. The adult Jesus, now nearly 30 years old, is singled out in a momentous, and **spectacular**, way.

Of course, we who know the Gospel story recall that Jesus moves on from this moment into the wilderness, alone, and begins his ministry shortly afterward. Much of our time during **Lent** and Holy Week retell the ministry and teachings of Jesus as he moved toward the saving event for us all: the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday. The *Gospel of John* and other texts proclaim that the **kingdom of God** has come, realized in Christ himself; but, the work of creating and forming God’s kingdom is **not complete**. God’s kingdom has come to earth, bringing **salvation** for all humankind. Even more profound and significant for each of us, the kingdom is **eternal**. And, it is **available** to us through our faith and God’s **mercy and grace**.

And, all of this, our salvation, is possible, because **Christ** took action in the wilderness on that special day with John and in the very act of his **baptism**. It was a **proclamation** like no other. And, through it, we are **transformed**. We are created and molded and shaped into a new creation to **serve God**, and all the world, in a **new way**: A way that includes the **forgotten**, that reaches out to the **unloved**, that inserts itself into the consciousness of those who insist on **withholding forgiveness**, and places a hand of **hope** on the shoulder of the unforgiven, the hurt, the injured, the sick, the dying, the grieving, and all of those who are doing what we generously call- **living**. This is also our call: God's **claim** on ALL our lives.

Jesus came to John for baptism, and it became a proclamation. It was a new beginning. Very likely, Jesus knew that this was right and necessary. Those present probably recalled the scripture from *Isaiah*:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you....

“Do not fear, for I am with you....”

Isaiah 43:2a-b, 5a NRSV

God proclaimed **undying love** and eternal support for **Jesus** that day in the wilderness with John the Baptist. John baptized Jesus, and something tremendous took place, **witnessed** by many. God identified Jesus and **God's Son**. It was a **fresh start** for everyone.

Perhaps, Jesus knew that something miraculous, like the descent of **God's Spirit**, would take place. Perhaps, he intended to use this as a public display for the specific purpose of launching his ministry. It was a remarkable and memorable event, because through the years the church has included **baptism** as an important part of our **faith journey**. It a visible and outward sign of **God's presence** and God's grace among us. It is a moment of **full acceptance** into the community of faith, renouncing sin and proclaiming our **faith in God** and the saving grace of Jesus, our **Risen Lord**.

And so, in this time I would like each of us to **remember** our baptism. If you recall that moment, think back to the love and **support** that surrounded you. If you were baptized as an infant or child, as many of us were, those feelings of **inclusion**, love, forgiveness, and **mercy** were taken by your **family** and all of those in the **congregation**. Nearly all of us **confirmed** that commitment in our teen years or as adults. Now, we take on the duty of teaching, guiding, and praying for **others in our care** and in our midst.

Our **baptism** does not end at the font here at the chancel. Instead, it is the **beginning** of a life of **service** and love. In the wilderness with John and many witnesses, God proclaimed Jesus as the **Messiah**. Now, God **calls us to serve**: to build the **kingdom** in the name of the One who came to save us all, Jesus Christ, **Son of God**, our **Risen Lord**.