

The Baptism of Jesus

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
January 13, 2013

Luke 3: 15-22

“Jesus: The Beloved” “Now, when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized...” Is that it? Is that all Luke has to say? His description of Jesus’ baptism is really no description at all! Luke is considered by many to be the most eloquent of all the Gospel writers. Think of his birth narrative or of the wonderful parables found only in Luke – Good Samaritan – Prodigal Son. This is a fellow who knows how to tell a good story. But when it comes to the baptism of Jesus, a rather significant event, all we get is – “Now when all the people had been baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...” Oh yes, we do get the heavens opening and the Spirit descending like a dove and the heavenly voice – all of which are hugely important – but when it comes to Jesus’ actual baptism...not much. I wonder why Luke, the man of wonderful words, uses so few words here? I mean, there is Jesus, standing in line, in a line of people waiting to be baptized, just waiting his turn like everyone else. And there is John, at the edge of the water, saying, “Next,” and Jesus steps into the river. No titles, no deference, no singing angels...just “Next.”

A story shared by Fred Craddock. “I don’t like anybody to call me and say, ‘Next!’ I have a name. I’m different than others. I tried to get that clear in my head when I was invited to preach at Riverside Church in New York some years ago. William Sloan Coffin, Jr., was the pastor and he said, ‘Can you come up and fill the pulpit? I have to be away.’ So I said I could come. It was in the summer. I was free. He said, ‘You can stay in my apartment, it’s near the church. I’ll tell the super that you’re coming.’

“So I went to New York and the super let me into his apartment. Bill was a bachelor at the time, and you could tell it. He was a great preacher, but he didn’t keep house. It really was a terrible apartment. I woke up on the Sunday morning I was to preach and went into the kitchen to get something from the refrigerator for breakfast. A note on the door said, ‘There’s nothing in here, Fred. Don’t look inside.’ Of course, I looked inside. There was nothing in there. He had told me I could go to the church and get breakfast there. I thought, great, I’ll eat with the church staff and find out where I’m to sit, stand, and who does this and that during the service. It will be a great orientation.

“I grabbed my robe and walked to the church. When I got there, there was a line of men down the side of the building and around the corner, over two hundred people. I got in line. ‘Next!’ I went to the little window and I got a scoop of egg, a sausage patty, a biscuit and a cup of coffee. ‘Next!’ I found a place at a table across from a man who had seen better days. He still had links on his cuffs, worn and dirty though they were. We ate. Finally I said to him, ‘Where are you from?’ He said, ‘Well, here and Albany.

“I asked, ‘What did you do in Albany?’

“ ‘I was a stockbroker. Was doing well, too, but the bottle got me. Lost my job, my house, my family, my marriage, everything, so here I am. My daughter said I could live with her as long as I stayed sober, but she didn’t want to raise her kids around a drunken old man. I was sober for four or five weeks, and then, I couldn’t do it. So I’m back.’

“He asked, ‘Where are you from.’

“I said, ‘Georgia.’

“ ‘What do you do?’

“ ‘I’m a preacher.’

“He laughed and said, ‘The bottle gets all of us, doesn’t it?’

Says Craddock, “When he said that to me, I wanted to get up, hit a knife on a glass to get everyone’s attention, stand up on the table and say, ‘Listen, you losers. I am Dr. Fred B. Craddock, the Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and in a few minutes I’ll be preaching in one of the great pulpits in America and you’ll be back on the street. I’m not like you!’ But I didn’t say that, because it would not have been true. You can be at the peak of your earning power or you can put your head in the post office window and ask, ‘Are the checks going to be late again this month.’ There’s a sense that it is all the same. The invitation into the kingdom of God is quite simple. A voice says, ‘Next!’” Could that be what Luke is trying to tell us with his bare-bones account of Jesus’ baptism...no matter who or what we are, ultimately, in God’s Kingdom, we are in the same line?

Commenting on this text, Robert Brearley, a Presbyterian pastor, writes, “According to Luke, all we know about the baptism of Jesus is that it was with ‘all the people’...Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had been broken by the ‘wear and tear’ of this world and had all but given up on themselves and their God. When the line of downtrodden and sin-sick people formed in hopes of new beginnings through a return to God, Jesus joined them. At his baptism, he identified with the damaged and broken people who needed God.”

They were all there in line that day, waiting to be baptized which is to say we were all there. The poor were there, of course, those who go through life with nothing but a handful of ashes. The poor always show up when anybody comes along preaching the riches of God’s good grace, whether it’s in a cathedral or under a tent in a Kansas wheat field. They’ll be there. Some have theirs now...let’s pray we’ll get our later. We can’t quit hoping. Yes, the poor were there.

The rich were there as well, in that line by the water. Does that surprise you? Yes...no? But they were there. Maybe sitting on their patios by the pool, considering how much they were paying to insure all their stuff, they began to wonder if perhaps there was something more – something other – than this. Maybe they were weary of looking for the market where true life is sold. I don’t know why, but they came to stand in that line.

The preachers came...oh yes, they were there. You can be in the ministry so long that you begin to get used to things like communion and choirs and hymns and candles and Christmas Eve services and

listening to your own sermons. The years go by and you just get used to it...don't really see it anymore, don't really hear it anymore. C.S. Lewis knew it, that loss of appetite, of engagement. He said, "It's like a general dampness in the body. I wish it would rain. I'd rather have rain than this dampness that sogs my mind." It happens...the years go by, the cat drags itself to another sunny spot on the floor, the clouds return after the rain, and life just seems to lose its flavor. It happens, and not just to clergy. All those wondering if there was much left in the urn of life...they were there, waiting in line. And, again, Jesus was there, too, with them, waiting his turn. He is always there.

The words is spoken, "Next!" and when we step into that water with Jesus, at that moment our beings are wrapped up with all other human beings: the well ones and the hurt ones, the brave ones and the weak ones, the successful ones and the ones who can't seem to get anything right, the fortunate ones and the ones who, perhaps through no fault of their own, have suffered setbacks. No red state, no blues state, no ideological tests...just folks, bound together in the river of life. That is why, to me at least, it is absolutely shameful that 67 members of the House of Representatives voted against aid for the victims of Hurricane Sandy, especially when you consider that many of those no votes came from representatives, such as the Congressman whose district includes Biloxi, Mississippi, who eagerly accepted federal aid when disaster struck their constituents. When ideological purity becomes more important than people, then we are surely lost. Words of Barbara Brown Taylor come to mind: "Whether we were carried in our mother's arms or arrived under our own steam, we got into the river of life with Jesus and all his flawed kin. There is not a chance we will be mistaken for one of them. Because we are them, thanks be to God, as they are us."

And one other thing we share, there by the river..."You are my son, the beloved." Jesus, in baptism, receives a new name...and so do we. Jesus is claimed as God's very own...and so are we. We are them, they are us, and all of us are God's very own forever. When you hear the familiar words of our text, what I hope you hear is God calling your name, I hope you are reminded that each of you is the beloved, each of you made, loved and claimed as God's precious child. When we leave this sanctuary today, any number of forces will conspire to define us and our loved ones. You already know this. Commercial messages will attempt to convince us that we are owned by a great economic machine whose purpose is to make of voracious consumers. Other voices will insist that we belong to no one but ourselves, that our truth is the only truth and that individualism is the only god deserving of our worship. Government will have its own ideas about ways to establish its claim on us. Yes, we will be touched by many forces seeking to control us. But standing in the river with Jesus transcends all this. We are not simply cogs in some great economic, military-industrial, or government machine. We are not pawns in some political process we cannot control. We hear and respond to another voice, another calling, another hope..."I have called you by name, you are mine." Don't forget that! In the words of Robert Brearly, "Luke uses few words to share with us the baptism of our Lord. But those few words lead us to deep wellsprings of joy...To identify with all people, to depend upon God for the strength to live and to love, and to hear the affirmation of God as the source of our calling and purpose in life are the most enduring joys of life. These are the blessings of our life together in Christ as the church."

The wonderful old preacher, Halford Luccock, had a story for just about any occasion, including one for a day like this when we reflect on baptism. He told of an old slave woman from Georgia who watched General Sherman's army go by on its march to the sea. She had never been away from her plantation; had never seen that many people in all her life. As the long procession of troops neared its end, she said, "So many of 'em. I reckon they haven't all got names." Well, her simple observation was really quite profound. It is easy to get lost in a crowd, to slip through the cracks in a busy time, to feel misplaced amid the machinery of the modern world. In a digital age, how often are you asked your number before you are asked your name? It is a profoundly human question to ask, "What is my name? Just who am I, really?"

A few years ago, Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., was asked by a TV interviewer why it was that her remarkable work seemed to have such a strong grip, such a deep emotional impact, on people. She replied, "It's the names. The names are the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names."

And so here's Jesus, standing in the muddy water of the Jordan River. Certainly it is a humble act, an act of self-identification with his people. But I think it is also so much more. Because as he stands there, it seems that even Jesus had to ask, "What is my name? Who am I really?" And what does he hear? He hears God call his name. Says Peter Storey of Duke Divinity School, for Jesus, there in the water, "Suddenly, all those first inklings of vocation that stirred in childhood, the un-shaped consciousness of call, the inner yearnings and searchings are brought into sharp focus. God names him: 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.' This affirmation is the defining moment for Jesus." He has a name; he is somebody; he is God's beloved; and God has called him into God's new creation. Do you suppose the same thing could be said about us?

Those of you who have been baptized, do you recall anything at all about your baptism? I have always found it fascinating to listen to people describe their baptism, even if they were baptized as infants – where was it, who was there, was it in a church, who was the minister?

United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, says this about his baptism: "After a large Sunday dinner, family and friends gathered in the living room of my grandmother's rambling house for the event

that made me a Christian. Lifting a silver bowl filled with water, the preacher said some ritual words, made some promises and baptized me.

“There is much about my baptism I would have done differently. Baptism properly belongs in a church, not a living room. Yet God manages to work wonders despite our ineptitude. And becoming Christian is something done to us and for us before it is anything done by us. As an infant, I was a passive recipient. Someone had to hold me, administer the water, tell the story of what Jesus had done and the promise of what he would do. Somebody had to model, for me, the life of faith. It was all gift, all grace...I am the product of a human family with all the goodness and badness of most any family...yet, as my baptism signified, I was also a gift of God. Heaven was mixed up in who I was and was to become.”

He concludes, “From the day of my baptism, in ways that I’m still discovering, it has been impossible fully to explain me without reference to the water, the promises, the story, the hands laid upon my head. Whatever criticism anyone may raise about the way I was baptized, that baptism worked.”

How about you? Did your baptism work? Has heaven been mixed up in who you were, who you are, who you are to become? You know, I’m not sure I can ever preach about baptism without returning to Mac, the hard-living character played by Robert Duvall in the film, *Tender Mercies*. You might recall it. Mac is a down-on-his-luck country songwriter who battles the bottle. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board in her roadside Texas motel in exchange for some handyman help. Somehow, a measure of grace gets a toehold in Mac’s life, and eventually he and the widow’s young son, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized. The day comes, they go to church, they’re baptized. And driving home after the baptism, Sonny says, “Well, we done it, Mac, we was baptized.” Then, peering into the truck’s rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment. “Everybody said I’d feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?” Mac smiles and answers, “Not yet.” “You don’t look any different, Mac. You think I look any different?” “Not yet,” Mac answers once again.

Did your baptism work? Do you feel like changed people? Like Sonny, we don’t always see ourselves as changed people. There’s a lot of “not yet” still in our lives. Unlike Jesus, we don’t often see the heavens open and hear the voice of God. And yet, again, could it be that what was said to Jesus is in fact said to each and every one of us? Could it be that we have a name, a call, a significance that we haven’t even begun to wrap our brains around?

That can be hard to believe at times. I mean, I get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and too often what I see is that same old face staring back at me; that same face with its same failures, shortcomings, memories of all the times I have disappointed myself and others, all the times I have failed to be the person God calls me to be. And more often than not the world outside my mirror isn’t particularly helpful either. As one preacher has said, the world has a way of “wringing us out.” You’re called names in school, you get a poor score on a test, things go badly at work, the coveted promotion never comes, you have a bitter argument with a loved one. We get “wrung out.”

I mean, no one knows this better than Charlie Brown, right? He’s talking with Linus, and he says, “I wonder why it happens? Just when you think everything is perfect, life deals you a blow!” “I know what you mean,” Linus answers. “Maybe we should all wear batting helmets.” Ever feel that way? Ever feel like maybe you should go out with some kind of a batting helmet, maybe some kind of an armored shield between you and the world? The world can wring us out. The preacher talks about baptism and being a changed person, and Heaven knows I’m struggling enough just to be the person I am right now.

But my mind goes to a comment attributed to Martin Luther. He said that when life just seemed too hard for him, in those times when nothing in life seemed to be going right and everything and everyone was against him – and he certainly had more than his share of such times – he would look into that mirror, see the same old face, and say to himself, “You are baptized. Never forget, you are baptized.” And that was enough to see him through.

You are baptized. You have been named and somebody’s calling your name. Each of you, in your own unique, personal, even weird and strange way, each of you is a beloved child of God, an heir to God’s promise of unconditional love and grace. Remember that watermark. When you look at that same old face in the mirror look for the watermark, that reminder that you are a beloved child of God with whom God is well pleased. Dare to say yes to the gift of life, dare to take your place in God’s human family, dare to step out and make a difference for the Kingdom of God. For the “not yet” of baptism actually can be good news: you haven’t yet arrived, there are still so many unexplored possibilities for each of you.

There is a church denominational office that features a fountain where water runs down the smooth granite slab. Visitors are invited to place their hands on the slab, let the water stream over their hands as they meditate on the words carved into the slab, “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” That’s not a bad six word summary of this morning’s sermon. As our prayer concerns reveal, we come here each week with so much on our hearts: there is one whose life has been knocked off its foundation by the death of a loved one, one whose life has been wrenched by divorce, one for whom personal failure seems like the end of the world. We come here vulnerable, hurting, hoping dreaming, crying, and

rejoicing. Which is to say, so many of us come here in a state of “not yet.” And I am aware that I am usually woefully short of ready solutions and happy answers. But what I can say, much like the words on that fountain, is this: remember your baptism, remember that God knows your name; remember that you have a place in this unfolding human drama and always, God’s creative spirit is at work – claiming us, birthing us, renewing us.

I don’t know--are you all finished? Have you done all you can do, have you pretty much decided that nothing new under the sun? Well, hang around just a little longer, because if I’m not mistaken I think I just heard God say...”not yet!”