

The First Sunday after the Epiphany/ The Baptism of our Lord

Year C

Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

January 10, 2016

In the Name of the One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When we last heard from Luke (at least liturgically) we were with Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem. There were some shepherds and angels coming and going, but it was otherwise a fairly quiet scene.

Popular hymns would have us believe that maybe some cattle were lowing, but Jesus was asleep in the hay and making little if any noise. The night was silent. Holy. The stars shown bright and a stable lamp was lit. If you happened to pass by you would have seen a family of three, huddled together in the lamp's golden glow, keeping warm against the chill of the night air.

If you haven't been to church since Christmas, you are in for a little lectionary whiplash.

Today, Luke has taken us forward about 30 years and dropped us into a scene of commotion, movement, noise, crowds, excitement, and expectation. We are no longer in a stable, but at the side of a river. Mary and Joseph are nowhere to be seen, replaced by crowds of people and a fiery prophet preaching repentance. The crowd is hopeful and the chattering has reached a fevered pitch. Just who is this preacher? Could he be the one? Could he be the long awaited Messiah?

"No," John answers.

In fact there is another who is coming, and he will be even more powerful than John.

More powerful – and yet... and yet...what would this power look like?

Nothing like anything that the crowds would expect.

Now, in Luke's text we are not told that John baptizes Jesus. Only that Jesus was baptized – along with many others.

Unlike the other Gospel writers, Luke doesn't give us many details about Jesus' baptism – only this - that he was baptized with many others and afterwards he prayed.

As one scholar puts it:

"According to Luke, all we know about the baptism of Jesus is that it was with *all the people*."

Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinners. Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had been broken by the wear and tear of this selfish 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 (Robert Brearley in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p 236)."

Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - described through his ministry and teaching and demonstrated by the story of his baptism – we learn that not only will the powers of the world be turned upside

down, the very definition of power will be defeated – transformed. Power and authority will not come from lording over people, but walking beside them, living with them and dying for them.

In this Gospel passage Luke continues to impress upon us his theology of the incarnation, his insistence that God comes to us to be with us in all of our humanity – and to identify with and take upon himself the breadth of human experience – even the experience of being born dirt poor, even the experience of living in a world consumed by violence, even the experience of being desperate, hungry, and in need of baptism – in need of entering into the deep - into community with the ones he came to save.

Over the last two weeks and through these two texts in Luke’s Gospel (the one which describes Jesus’ birth and the one which speaks of his baptism), “we are urged” according to another scholar, “to move quickly beyond the intimate scene of Jesus birth toward the more challenging vision of his baptism (Nathan Mitchell in A Christmas Sourcebook, Liturgy Training Publications).

In short, we are asked to move in the direction of life itself: from concern for intimacy to concern for community.”

A Christian parish becomes its best self when it accepts the challenge of community,” he continues. “The parish community, as the real expression of a local church, cannot limit its attention to the search for justice and intimacy among its own members; it must be prepared to take up the cross, standing against evil and injustice wherever they exist in the world.”

And I would add to the author’s concern for standing up against evil and injustice – to standing with people in grief, brokenness and darkness – just as Jesus stood beside all those on the shore of the baptismal waters searching for healing, light, love, and comfort.

This past week, our parish demonstrated just what the author champions – we became our best selves when we accepted the challenge of community.

When a longtime member of the Wednesday AA group, and a friend to several in our parish, died suddenly on Christmas Eve, her friends and family came to us asking if we could hold her memorial service at Redeemer. Of course the staff said yes.

But we needed many of you to make this service part of your ministry. And you did. We had volunteers prepare the nave for the service, taking down all the Christmas decorations, creating beautiful floral arrangements, and setting up the altar. Yesterday others carried the cross in procession, served as acolyte and usher, assisted at communion, and more.

As we were preparing for this funeral, I was reminded of the other times over the last few years when we have come together to help families “outside” of our Sunday morning community who are experiencing profound grief over the death of a loved one - for the family of the son of a former rector, the spouse of a diocesan priest...

I was touched in particular by our altar guild whose members were working this week to ensure there was coverage for the funeral despite illness, travel, and busy schedules.

I wrote to them sharing my gratitude for their efforts. “This is why we exist,” I said, “to rally and be the church for those who need some light in the midst of deep darkness. This is when I am most proud and happy to be part of

this church. Thank you all for rallying in this busy and germ-filled season. I trust we are all being held together by God and I am grateful to be shaped in new ways by this family I had never known before this last week and by you all – my church family.”

I didn't know I would be sharing the text of this email in this sermon – or that this would even be relevant to what I was preaching. However, it is central to what I want to leave you with today.

The author of the Gospel according to Luke and those who have written and commented on these passages, remind us why and how we live in Christian community – why and how we live into the promises made by us or for us on the day of our baptism.

Therefore, I want us to take this moment to remember our own baptism and renew the vows we made to stand with and for those on the margins, at the side of the river, deep in distress, darkness, loneliness and fear, to stand with one another inside and beyond the walls of this parish, to speak up and for the lost, to embrace the sad and lonely, and nourish all those who hunger...

Please turn to page 292 in your Book of Common Prayer (for the Renewal of Baptismal Vows)