

Named and Claimed
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Rarely does a famous musician play without an opening act. If you are the headliner you want someone to warm up the crowd...to get them engaged and ready...to give them time to anticipate your performance.

In many ways it seems this is what John the Baptist did for Jesus. He had been preaching and teaching, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”¹ And by the time we get to today’s reading, people were responding. Not only were they responding, but they were starting to think that maybe John *was* the headliner, the one they had been waiting for.

And yet, John was always clear. He was clear that his role was to prepare the way for the one who would come. His role was to get people ready...to begin the conversations that Jesus would continue...to prepare people to reshape their lives in such a way that they aligned with what they would come to know as Jesus’ purposes and values. And then his role was to get out of the way so that Jesus could do his work and people could follow him.

So, in the midst of this transition comes today’s story. And while we’ve gotten used to the story of the baptism of Jesus, in many ways we also tend to think of it as an unlikely tale.

After all, why would Jesus need to be baptized anyway?

And if he was the one who everyone was to be anticipating, what authority for baptizing him did John have? How did the “opening act” get the privilege of baptizing the “headliner”?

¹ Luke 3:3, NRSV.

And since tradition has embraced the idea that Jesus was without sin, but *we* understand one of the primary meanings of baptism to be about forgiveness *of* sin, what sense did it make for him to be baptized?

But, what if we remember, what we often remind ourselves of...that Jesus was Jewish? And the practices that are spoken of in this text, while certainly getting a specific spin from John, are likely more in line with the Jewish practices of ritual purification than the Christian understanding of baptism. While the word used here in this chapter of Luke is the Greek word “baptizo,” from which we get our word “baptism,” in Jewish tradition this would have indicated ritual purification that involved immersion whether of hands, utensils or the whole body. This ritual purification would have connected back to the Levitical laws of the Hebrew scriptures.

And so, we are reminded that perhaps this wasn’t even the only time that Jesus experienced baptism. Rather than being a once in a lifetime event, “baptizo” would have been a well know ritual of purification in order to be able to participate fully in religious life.

Because baptism is different for us...for most of us it *is* a once in a lifetime event. And because within Christianity it comes with many meanings that range from forgiveness of sin to joining the church to eternal salvation to acknowledging God’s call in our lives and more...because of all this we bring with us, we so often focus the conversation around this text on Jesus’ baptism.

But what if the real message of this text comes not in the act of baptism itself but in the words of verse 22 which reads, “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.’”²

² Luke 3:22, NRSV.

See, we have so come to identify Jesus as the Son of God and gotten so used to that idea that we rarely actually pause with all it means. But in this act that Luke tells us occurred “when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,”³ we see Jesus named and claimed by God.

And it is in the next chapter that we hear that Jesus experienced temptation, lived up to who he was created and called to be, and then began his public ministry.

So, Jesus, it seems wasn’t just named and claimed for the sake of God speaking such words. But he was named and claimed for the mission to which he was called...for the identity that he had, which was as one created in God’s own image and an identity that impacted how he lived.

And if we remember back to the earlier verses that John read for us this morning, John the Baptist was already talking about some of Jesus’ mission. There he used imagery from the process of harvesting and preparing wheat – imagery of separating out what was useful from what was not.

Too often we have heard this kind of imagery used as a way to talk about separating people – as if the good people, the Christians are separated from the bad people, the sinners. And yet that doesn’t seem to be what John is saying here. Rather there is the simple reality that, life is a process of constantly making choices, of choosing where our loyalties lie, of choosing what is helpful and useful *and* what needs to be set aside.

And if we pay attention to the life and teachings of Jesus, he does that time and time again. It begins in the story that follows this – the story of the temptation – as he makes choices *for* those things that are of the heart of God and *against* the temptations of power and prestige, wealth and security. And it continues throughout his life as he welcomes stranger and sinner, as

³ Luke 3:21, NRSV.

he reinterprets laws to open wider the gates of God's love rather than to build walls that divide, and as he faces death with courage rather than embracing a violent response.

Throughout Jesus' life, this moment of which we hear at the end of today's reading, continued to shape him. Luke doesn't tell us who heard the voice of God, whether it was everyone gathered, a few chosen people or only Jesus. But we do know is that these words of naming and claiming him as God's beloved child must have echoed throughout Jesus' life and ministry.

And, there is something else here.

See, the easy thing is to simply let this be an experience Jesus had. We can hear the story. We can celebrate how special he was. We can leave it there.

But, what happens when we come to understand that we also are named and claimed? What happens when we come to live fully as those who are also called the beloved children of God?

Because the reality is that we claim this in our rituals. In both the dedication of young children and in baptism, we use language that talks about us as children of God. In so many other times in worship as acknowledge our belonging to God, our belovedness and our chosenness.

And, if we remember what people like Marcus Borg have talked about, that maybe the difference between us and Jesus isn't so much about our creation or the stuff we are made of, isn't so much about his divinity and our humanity, but is that somehow Jesus managed to be an open channel to the love and presence of God in a way that most days we don't, but that we can – that we have the ability to do...if we remember that and especially if we embrace that idea,

then we are also called to remember our belovedness, and the fact that God names and claims us as well.

See, all too often, we say that we are children of God but we don't really believe it. All too often we affirm with head nods and warm feelings in worship the fact that God loves and chooses us without end.

But what if we really believed it?

What if we really lived it? What if we shaped our lives so we lived from the heart of God and in the ways of Jesus?

What if we could hear, somewhere in the recesses of our minds and our hearts, those words, "You, [name]; you, [name]; you, [name] are my beloved child with whom I am so pleased"?

Because, that is so true. We don't have to deserve it, we don't have to earn it, we already ARE God's beloved children, loved by God and claimed by God for joy.

As a way of remembering this, we want to invite you to come forward to one of the bowls on either side of the communion table, to touch the water and feel water poured over your hands as you are reminded of your chosenness.