

## “Living Baptized”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

January 9, 2022

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Later in the worship service we are going to sing the song, “I Am the Light of the World!” The first verse says this, “When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the magi and the shepherds have found their way home, the work of Christmas is begun” (Words: Jim Strathdee, in response to a Christmas poem by Howard Thurman).

We spent the Christmas season acknowledging that we are called to do more than remember a story...that we are called to live in the ways of Jesus, to allow ourselves to be transformed by his story in such a way that we transform the world.

The same could be said of baptism.

On the first Sunday after the Epiphany, the lectionary gives us the story of Jesus’ baptism. But again this is not an episode from Jesus’ life that we are simply invited to watch. This is not a story around which we are simply meant to ask questions about Jesus. Rather we are invited to watch and ask about Jesus *in order that* we can model our lives after his and live in his ways.

So, we *do* start by wondering what we learn about Jesus through Luke’s telling of his baptism.

We learn that Jesus lived his life in the midst of community. Even though we understand Jesus as particular, different in certain ways, it is important to note that the story of his baptism is not told as a special event just for him. Rather, as Luke writes, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...” we can picture Jesus taking his place in a long line of John’s followers, waiting his turn.

We also learn that prayer is important to Jesus. See we often know the part of the story where the Spirit descends as a dove and a voice from heaven speaks. But what we sometimes neglect to notice is that it is as Jesus was praying that this occurred. Throughout Luke’s gospel we see Jesus entering prayer time and time again, a reminder that the openness he has to the heart of God isn’t just about him being made of different stuff, but about him nurturing a relationship with God, being in communion with God.

We also hear, in that heavenly voice, a claim of Jesus’ belovedness. It was with the knowledge of this belovedness that he was sent into the world, into public ministry, into the joys and the struggles, into the delights and the temptations. And his belovedness shaped him because his belovedness wasn’t just about him, but it was about how he related to the people and world around him.

See, too often in the Church we focus on baptism as a personal decision, a personal event. Baptism is too often talked about as if it is what gets us a ticket into heaven, as if baptism is some magical experience that guarantees a spot in a future existence out there somewhere.

The Church has also spent a lot of energy talking about baptism as a sign of forgiveness of sin. And while there is value in our conversations around sin and forgiveness, too often we have convinced people that they have to earn their forgiveness or that their repentance and forgiveness are what lead God to love them. And too often we have built the walls so high that many people feel they can never get there.

Too often the Church has used baptism as a tool to control behavior or to divide people into categories of acceptable and unacceptable, while ignoring the invitation of baptism into deeper relationship with God and more abundant living not only for ourselves but for all.

Yes, baptism asks us to change. And, as the wondering questions in the Children's Moment acknowledged, change can be hard.

But what is the change that baptism invites us into?

Maybe part of that answer comes in the verses before our reading today. In Luke 3:10 and 11 we hear, "And the crowds asked [John], 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'"

Then he goes on with specific instructions for the tax collectors and soldiers who asked him questions, instructions that remind them that the choices they make should honor other people rather than simply following what the system allows.

If we are paying attention throughout this story we will notice that these changes that people are invited into are about relationships. They are about how people interact with others. They are about how people tend to their relationship with God. They are about how people claim their own belovedness in a way that leads to giving and receiving abundant life. They are also changes that impact how people live in relationship to the systems and world around them.

The Church has often been much more eager to measure desired change in terms of personal choices - things like consumption of alcohol or gender of partner - and yet in the story of Jesus' baptism as well as the stories of his life we see a different focus.

The changes that baptism and a life of following Jesus invite us into are changes that challenge many of the systems within which we live comfortably.

They are changes that ask us to value people more than things.

They are changes that ask us to give up our comfort, and sometimes even our security, for the wellbeing of others.

They are changes that ask us to acknowledge how we have benefitted from systems such as patriarchy and white supremacy, and then make commitments to help move away from these systems and toward the realm of God.

When we baptize people here at First Christian, we ask three questions. First, we ask the tradition question modeled after Peter's good confession in scripture - a question about who Jesus is.

But then we ask two more

We ask: Do you covenant to turn away from injustice and everything that would separate you from God and do you turn toward God, the source of love, and to Jesus as a guide for how God would have you live, loving and serving your neighbor? In other words, this question asks if the one being baptized understands that baptism is about more than what we believe about Jesus. It is about how we will live in this world and in relationship to all creation.

Finally we ask a third question: Do you desire to be part of this community as together we strive to follow Jesus? In other words, do you want to take this journey of growing in faith together with these people?

Friends, as we continue to find our way into this new year, whether we were baptized 80 years ago or have not yet made that choice, we are invited to join together in community with Jesus and each other, to claim our own belovedness and that of every other person, to commit to living in ways that value the other and that work against injustice.

I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon the song we will sing at the end of worship today. The first verse ends talking about the work of Christmas beginning, work that is really the work of the faithful year 'round. The second verse begins to articulate what that work is: "To find the lost and lonely one, to heal the broken soul with love, to feed the hungry children with warmth and good food, to feel the earth below, the sky above!" (Words: Jim Strathdee, in response to a Christmas poem by Howard Thurman).

As we watch Jesus be baptized...as we remember or anticipate our own baptism...may we hear the invitation to live abundantly as God's beloved children and to live in ways that bring abundance for all. Amen.