

“Named and Claimed As Children of God”

C Epiphany One; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. JESUS’ BAPTISM

Luke 3: ¹⁵ The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?”

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ But John intervened: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

²¹⁻²² After all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized. As he was praying, the sky opened up and the Holy Spirit, like a dove descending, came down on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

II. WHAT IS IT FOR?

In my first parish out of seminary, a young mother who was involved in our worship team, along with her husband, came up to me after the service one day and said, “We need to talk to about having Shea, (their baby daughter) baptized. You know, in case something happens to her.”

I stammered a bit –I admit. *After* I was struck silent for a moment. Wonderful that they wanted to explore having sweet little Shea baptized in this new congregation where they were finding a welcoming church family! *Not* so wonderful that their understanding of the purpose of baptism was what we called in seminary “Baptism as fire insurance.”

“Having the baby done” – either to please the parents or grandparents, or to make sure she didn’t go to hell if something catastrophic should happen anytime soon – is a prevalent theme in our culture. We’ve come to an odd intersection of inherited traditions and beliefs blended with community expectations and a little “missed History and Bible Class” about what Baptism means, why we do it, and why it matters.

So, today, we take a fresh look – in a quick glance – and shed some of the light of Epiphany on what Baptism *is* and is *not* – what it’s for and what’s been forgotten over the centuries and decades past. What *is* it for, this ritual we undertake? What does it mean?

III. FORGIVENESS AND MORE!

John the Baptist tells us in Luke: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

One emphasis has been on that *change* part. The “Cleaning house.” “Baptism for the remission of sins.” In fact, Baptism has a long and *varied* history through the ages, and even our four gospel writers approach its purpose differently. Different

aspects and meanings have been emphasized through the centuries, precisely *because* it's about forgiveness but, oh, so much more.

In fact, it's been controversial from the get go. Why? Because the baptism of John the Baptist was about repentance, turning around and heading down a new path, the remission of sins.

And here's the rub! Why was Jesus getting baptized – by John or anyone else?! Jesus was said to be *sinless* –at least at the time that the gospels were written – if not all throughout history. And if Jesus was without sin, why on earth was he traipsing down to the river to be baptized by John? Just like you and me, Joe and Suzy, Ralph and Betty?

Jesus didn't seem to think he didn't need it! Maybe the scholars and the gospel writers who debate this should look to Jesus instead of wrastling around this question. For Baptism is—to be sure— about forgiveness, but it's about *so much more!* And Jesus knew that.

And God showed up! To help Jesus open everyone's eyes, ears and hearts to the *so much more*.

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And these words come from heaven but they do not come out of the blue. For they are an echo of words from *Isaiah* long before, when God says to his children: "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you*" (43:1b, 4a).

Yes, baptism is about forgiveness. But it's also about *relationship*, and so much more!

IV. WHAT IT'S NOT:

So, let's deal quickly with what it's *not*.

Baptism is Not:

* - "Getting the baby *done*." (like a vaccination against measles!)

* - Not fire insurance (like a magic potion or spell cast on one child and not others that determines if the one dies too soon *they* have a ticket to Heaven, but that other one who's parents didn't get on the schedule in time have sent their child "the other way.")

* - Not conditional.

"Baptism does not enroll us in a select camp of saved persons. If baptism becomes the ticket to God's favor, then it contradicts the grace it affirms. While God's grace invites us to respond, grace is always unmerited and unconditional." (Epperly)
In other words, Baptism is not a litmus test – a dividing line for the Ins and Outs . Not a membership card for the Kingdom – as if only the baptized are beloved children of God who created all.

V. WHAT IT IS!

David Lose offers this prioritizing: "It's about love, identify, affirmation, commitment, promise, and still more. Baptism is *first* about all these other things and *then*, as by-product and gift, about forgiveness. God proclaims God's great love for us; calls, names, and claims us as God's beloved children; gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit;...and then, *because* of God's love for us, God also promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times."

Baptism is a holy connection with Jesus: Jesus is baptized *like we are*, and we *get* to be baptized – and therefore named as beloved child – **just like Jesus is!**

We hear the same words too! "You are my Son, my daughter,

and with you I am well pleased.” And those words – “you are my beloved child” – **still have the power to change lives.**

Baptism is – so many symbols. So many signs and wonders. It can’t be contained in one understanding – locked in a box, or a font. Baptism is ongoing, too! It happens at one pinnacle moment in our lives, and it happens over and over – again and again.

Every time we remember who and whose we are as a beloved, baptized child of God. Every time we make promises around a font to children of any age – like we did today. Every time we come to the font ourselves and renew that symbol for our own lives – water on the forehead – reminder of our true self.

Baptism is: Forgiveness of sins, a turning life down a new path.

Baptism is: God’s commitment to *us*; Spirit’s promise to be present with us *in every age and stage* of our lives –from when we were knit in our mother’s womb, through our birth, childhood, first half of life, second half of life and on beyond this life.

At *whatever* age or stage of life we are formally baptized, baptism *is*. It is a state of being; a path for life – a unique journey. Not just a one-time act but a way of life. An identity.

Just like the state of being forgiven, we are always—in every moment – beloved, claimed, named, chosen, baptized children of the Divine.

"No matter what happens, no matter how low and discouraged you feel, no matter what is happening around you and in your life, don't you ever let anyone tell you that you are *anything* but a precious and beloved child of God." (Kate Matthews)

What we do today, in our yearly renewal is symbolic of what we might and can do every day. When we wake up, look in the mirror, and say aloud:

“Hey you! You are God’s beloved child! Chosen and marked by love. You’ve got this. Live this day and every day in that light.”

Brennan Manning:

"Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion."

VI. OUR RESPONSE – JUST SAY YES!!

Baptism is a gift from God – God getting intimately involved in our lives and loves. It is also our **response** to our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. In Baptism we say “Yes!” to our identity as a beloved child of God. In renewing our baptismal vows we says Yes! every year to our gathered community. And yes to our parents and godparents who took that sacred step years ago on our behalf. Yes! You did a *good* thing, Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, beloved family and friends, when you brought me to the font – at whatever age.

Bruce Epperly reminds us that *our* yes is not any more “conditional” than God’s love, and that we are as beloved as Jesus and no less close to our Creator: “Our “yes” opens us to greater divine energy and possibility, but not greater love. Jesus is God’s beloved *not* just as a result of his piety and unique relationship with God; he is God’s beloved to show us that we are *also* loved by God, regardless of our past mistakes or future challenges.”

God’s Chosen Spirit Person—Thin Persons

Epperly goes on to make a fascinating connection, as we make that connection with God of saying “yes!” We become “Thin Persons” –like Jesus!

“The Celtic Christians speak of “thin places” where divinity and humanity are transparent to one another. There may also be “thin persons,” (like Jesus) persons in whom God’s light shines brightly, revealing Godself in saving ways. God can choose a certain person to be the bearer of healing, chosen to bless the earth. But the one chosen must also choose to respond, embracing her or his destiny as God’s **Chosen Spirit Person.**

I believe that this intimate call and response describes what happened to Jesus on the Jordan River.

And, what *we* are called to as well when we respond to God with our yes. Our love and commitment to walk the path with Christ. To be a Thin Person!!!

I am a child of God.
I am not what I wear
What I drive
Or how much I weigh.

God is constantly choosing us. Naming us, claiming us as Her beloved child. Will *we* continually choose God? Make this a 2-way street, this divine love affair?

To define ourselves radically –everyday and in every way—as one beloved *by* God and live our days in that light? With water on our forehead and words of blessing bestowed, we both receive and give our baptismal vows.

Baptism is many things. Both/and. Remembering the powerful act of God’s self-giving and affirming our core identity as Beloved Above All Else.

And, renewing our vows—whether spoken ourselves or by our parents and ancestors on our behalf.

*“Maybe the journey
isn’t so much about becoming anything.
Maybe it’s about un-becoming everything
that really isn’t you,
so you can be who
you were meant to be in the first place.”*

(Paula Coelho)

CELTIC PRAYER:

I am no longer my own, but Yours. Use me as You choose; rank me alongside whoever You choose; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for You, or laid aside for You, raised up for You, or brought down low for You; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; with my whole heart I freely choose to yield all things to Your ordering and approval. So now, God of glory, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, You are mine, and I am Your own. Amen.