

1 Baptism of Our Lord (10 January) 2010

Pr. Franklin Wilson
Luther Memorial Church
Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism of Our Lord

Jan. 10, 2010

Jesus was baptized, and his baptism gives hope. The question is, does our Lord's Baptism give *us* hope? I mean, in an age when taking the kids to see Santa seems just as important, if not more important, than Baptism, why should the Baptism of Our Lord give us any more hope than, say, a photo of our grandchild sitting beatifically on Santa's lap?

Not that Jesus wouldn't have rejoiced at a photograph of himself sitting on the lap of a jolly old elf like Santa. Shoot, as we saw on the first Sunday of Christmas, the child Jesus was up to most anything, including outfoxing his parents, arguing with his elders, and giving the slip to convention in general and parental authority in particular. So it's not hard to imagine Jesus getting his picture taken on Santa's lap or, for that matter, on Lady Gaga's lap either. As I say, Jesus is up to most anything.

But Baptism? *Why Baptism?* It's not exactly like getting baptized either was or is all *that* extraordinary. For heaven's sake: Luke says that "*all the people* were baptized, and Jesus was also baptized." So, whatever the reason might have been, it couldn't have been because no one else was doing it: because apparently *everyone else was* doing it! Or, more accurately, everyone was getting it done to them. For all the world, Luke makes it look like Jesus was just one more face in a sea of nameless faces—*all the people*—passively getting baptized.

As Luke reports the event, its ambiguity fairly shocks pious religious sensibility: Luke isn't even clear who exactly does the baptizing. Luke reports Jesus' baptism *after* Herod has John imprisoned—that's part of the bit left out of today's Gospel. So maybe it wasn't John who baptized Jesus—or maybe Luke makes the baptizer ambiguous in order to discourage any thought that that John might have been the Messiah instead of Jesus. Again, according to Luke, "all the people were wondering whether John were the Messiah." So Luke's Gospel gets John out of the picture even before Jesus and all the people get baptized. In other words, unlike our modern sentimentality regarding who does the baptizing, Luke seems to suggest two more important things: *who* gets baptized, and *what the baptized do*.

So it's crucial that *Jesus* is baptized just like everyone else. It's apparently

2 Baptism of Our Lord (10 January) 2010

unimportant who baptized Jesus (or anyone else), where Jesus was baptized, in which river or pond; nor is it important to record the date, what he was wearing or if he wore anything at all. Luke simply records “Jesus (was) baptized,” and then the next crucial thing: *Jesus prayed*. As Luke has it, the baptism of Jesus leads immediately to prayer: “And Jesus was baptized and as he was praying...” It’s as though Baptism turns on prayer the way a faucet turns on water; once he gets baptized, Jesus prays. Prayer is the first thing the baptized Jesus does.

The correlation between Jesus’ baptism and his prayer may raise all sorts of questions—questions that naturally arise from human curiosity—questions like, “If Jesus is divine, why does he need to pray? If Jesus is God himself, how can he pray to God? If Jesus is God’s Son, what more could he possibly ask or want? Does God pray?”

The Bible generally doesn’t address questions of human curiosity: it proclaims faith for human depravity—trust that the simple use of a most common thing like water, together with God’s promise, gives birth to faith; and faith, in turn, is the mother of prayer—not merely asking God for things, but blessing God, and thanking God for all people and things, and praising God for the gifts of life and faith, and the joys of human community even amid trouble, conflict, and pain.

The point isn’t that Jesus was baptized exactly the same way we were, but that Jesus was baptized in water, just like everybody else. It’s not that Jesus is unique because he was baptized, but that in the midst of baptism God declares Jesus “my beloved Son.” In other words, it’s not baptism that makes Jesus unique, though it may be unique that the beloved Son of God condescends to something as ordinary as baptism in something as utterly common as water. The Baptism of Jesus is special by the very fact that it is not special. The Baptism of Jesus is special in its ordinariness: Luke says, “And it came to pass as all the people were baptized, Jesus (also) was baptized and as he was praying...”

Nor is the baptism of Jesus unique because he was baptized in Jordan River water, a river and a water sometimes thought more holy than other water; Jordan water bottled, wrapped, and labeled “holy” is no more holy than water that comes out of a pipe in Madison, Kabul, or Baghdad. Though the water in which Jesus was baptized was surely holy, it was holy in the sense that *all* water is holy: ordinary stuff bearing the gift and promise of God’s overflowing goodness.

So Jesus was baptized as all the people were baptized in the ordinary, tepid, murky water of the Jordan River flowing through a troubled land, a land conflicted, occupied by a foreign army, and ruled over by a petty government beholden to a great world power--even as that land is yet ruled by a petty government beholden to great world powers, a land riven by ancient conflict, current animosity, war, and corruption. Even as Herod imprisoned John and killed him on the whim of a woman not his legal wife, so Herod's land today imprisons and kills those who oppose and obstruct a government selling wicked intention

3 Baptism of Our Lord (10 January) 2010

as holy ground.

But that's not the whole story. Now, as then, conflict has at least two sides even as Baptism involves two elements: water and word, the material and the ephemeral, the earthly and the heavenly, the human and the divine. Only now—in the wake of Christmas—we believe that the heavenly has become earthly, that the divine has become human, that the word has become flesh. And the baptism of our Lord confirms this: the child of God is baptized in the most earthy of ordinary stuff—and this evokes the proclamation of divine love: “This is my son, the beloved, in him I am well pleased.”

This is the extraordinary thing: that God should condescend to share our ordinary lives, enter our ordinary bodies, make of us ordinary people, one body—the crucified and risen body of the beloved Son. Christ’s baptism makes the ordinary extraordinary. In the face of this reality—a reality common as water—we are bound to *all the people* in their joy and in their sorrow, in their lives and in their deaths. Baptized into Christ Jesus—we are one with him, and we are one with all: called and sent as servants in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.