

Baptism of Jesus
Luke 3:15-17; 21 – 22
January 10, 2010

Our Gospel reading today comes from the third chapter of Luke, verses 15 through 17, 21 and 22. Please listen now for the reading of God's word for the people of God.

¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." ²¹When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²²and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

May this holy season be for each of us a time of moving beyond what is "reasonable" and toward the star of wonder; moving beyond grasping tight to what we have to unclenching our hands and letting go, following the Light where it leads; moving beyond competition toward cooperation, seeing that all humans are sisters and brothers; moving beyond the anxiety of small concerns towards the joys of justice and peace. May the transforming acceptance of Mary and Joseph, the imagination of the shepherds, and the persistence of the wise men guide us as we seek the Truth; always moving toward the Divine promise. Always aware God can be hidden in the frailest among us, always open to the unexpected flash of Grace, to the showing forth of that Love that embraces us all. Help us, guide us and direct us that we may find ourselves focused solely on you this morning as we listen for your Word in our lives. Through the words of my lips and in the meditations of our hearts, speak to us, O Lord we pray. Amen. (*From Education for Justice - www.educationforjustice.org. Adapted by J.M. Deren from "Blessings and Benedictions," by W.L. Wallace in Shine On, Star of Bethlehem, CAFOD, 2004.*)

Today marks the first Sunday in the Season of Epiphany; a season which begins January 6th of each year; marked as the twelve day following Christmas. Just as the Season of Advent, which preceded the Christmas Season as a time of expectance and anticipation, the Season of Epiphany follows the Christmas Season with its own themes and motifs. Epiphany is seen by many to be the climax of the Advent/Christmas Season. The term *epiphany* means to “to show” or “to make known” or even “to reveal.” In Western churches, it is often remembered by the retelling of the coming of the wise men as they brought gifts to the Christ child. In doing so, Jesus is “revealed” to the world as Lord and King. Likewise, in many Eastern churches, as with our lectionary reading today, the story of Jesus’ baptism is retold “revealing” the now adult Jesus had come for all people, all nations, all races and that the work of God in the world would not be limited only a few. (<http://www.crivoice.org/cyepiph.html>)

As a Community of Faith we meet each week to love one another and to encourage one another in our faith Journey. Here amongst the themes of Epiphany we find a familiar message of hope, salvation and healing. The Season of Epiphany is often observed as a time of focusing on the mission of the church in reaching others by “showing” Jesus as the Savior of all people. It is also a time of focusing on Christian solidarity and fellowship, especially in healing the divisions of prejudice and bigotry that are all too often created between God’s people. (<http://www.crivoice.org/cyepiph.html>)

The beginning of the third chapter of Luke’s gospel pinpoints the date of today’s reading to be “the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius;” approximately 28 to 29 A.D., which would make John and Jesus to be about 33 years old. Relatively young by today’s standards, John and Jesus would have been perceived more as elders of their time; that is John and Jesus were not

young men in the prime of their lives and so, by way of their wisdom, would have been met with some level of respect and authority.

Because of John's prophetic preaching and call for repentance (vs. 1 – 14), his public reputation had grown to the point that people were beginning to be filled with expectation and began to wonder if John might be the long awaited Messiah, the Christ. However, as we have studied earlier, John remained true to the mission for which he was conceived. John embraced his call to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus, his ministry and his message. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins . . . "I baptize you with water," preached John, "But one more powerful than I will come, the things of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Luke 3:3, 16) So, like John, we too are called to proclaim the good news to the people of a lost and dying world; we too are called to prepare the way for the reception of Jesus and his ministry.

The wheat-chaff separation written about here in the third chapter of Luke may give many the means to justify their actions in creating the afore mentioned divisions of prejudice and bigotry that are far too often seen in our culture today. Anti-Semitic rhetoric, the oppression of women, the need to turn a blind eye to the poor and the disenfranchised, the inability to fund successful HIV/AIDS intervention programs and the culturally excepted practice of voting into law constitutional amendments that subjugate the LGBTQ Community are all among the many divisions that are created by people all in the name of God. However, I am not sure that this is at all what John was trying to convey. As equally important as the Doctrine of Original Sin which reminds each of us of humanity's state of sin resulting from the Fall of Man is the lesser well known Doctrine of Original Blessing which speaks to the innate good which is found within each

of us. Our favorite sweater wearing, shoe changing childhood friend, Mr. Rogers, often pointed out that even people who are bad most of the time will be good some of the time and those who are good most of the time will be bad some of the time. (www.davidewart.ca) So the wheat-chaff separation is not separating into two groups of *bad* people versus *good* people, but is rather separating the good from the bad that is found within each of us.

So what does this mean for us in relation to John's message? In interpreting John's words at face value, I believe that people allow themselves to focus their attention on the supposed faults of others in order to distract themselves from looking deep within their own existence and explore their own flaws or faults. The people who lived during the time of John and Jesus found themselves in need of a personal relationship with their God and in order to accomplish such relationship they, like the people of today, needed to focus their attention away from the culturally created divisions among themselves and turn to the message of Christ – a message of radical inclusivity that marred the very nature of the exclusive world in which they lived.

Recall that during the second Sunday of Advent we met John's message with the following reaction:

The Word of the Lord came to John in the midst of politics and power that even we today have come to know so well. Not only was the world in which John lived in need of a Messiah, they were ready for one and so it was up to John to prepare for His arrival.
(http://www.ndwctoccoa.com/resources/2010YearC/20091206_Preparing_A_Pat h.pdf)

As an extension of our previous reaction, I believe that it is reasonable that we conclude John's practice of baptism was more than simply for repentance and forgiveness of sins. John's imagery which speaks to the innate existence of impurity within each of us is reflected in John's call to Mikvah, a ritual bath or *baptism* designed carried out by ritual immersion; an immersion

required to regain ritual purity after ritually impure incidents had occurred. John's message challenges us to acknowledge our birth right and calls us to reestablish ourselves as children of God.

The affirmation of Jesus' heritage is announced from Heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" and is immediately explained in human terms as Luke emphasizes this in the genealogy that follows; "[Jesus] was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, . . ." etc. down to, "who was the son of Adam, the son of God." Jesus' baptism is not about repentance; there was nothing for which Jesus' needed to repent. His baptism is about affirmation; about being publically and ritually reestablished with God. It is this same reestablishing of *our* identities which continues to be the primary work of the church today.

Have you chosen to reestablish your identity to God through Christ? If not, then know that it is not too late and there is no better time than now to make your desire for reconciliation known to God. There are two historical creeds on which we base our belief and faith; they are the Apostle's and the Nicene Creed. Though they are similar in structure, listen to the following words from the Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, . . . And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, . . . God of God, Light of Light, . . . begotten, not made, . . . Who, for [mankind] and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified . . . buried; and the third day He rose again . . .

Christ came that we may have life beyond this world, the Bible tells us, that Jesus came that we may have life abundantly . . . (John 10:10). The abundant life we are told about is available this morning for each and everyone here. During our Sermon Hymn this morning I encourage you to look deep within yourself; past your own bigotries, prejudices and worldly distractions and take advantage of the opportunity afforded to you today. You are welcome to pray where you are;

with a friend, a family member, your pastor or alone – you can stand, kneel, sit or come to this altar this morning, but regardless of your movement today, please do not leave this house without reestablishing a relationship with your God and your Creator today. Amen!