



Gather at the River

Luke 3:15-22

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Do you remember your baptism?

For some of us, remembering our baptism is difficult. Some were baptized as infants, and it's just been so many years, we can't remember back that far. Others may have been baptized more recently, perhaps just in the past couple years, and for you, recalling your baptism may not be quite as much of a stretch.

As we were taking down the Christmas decorations from the Sanctuary this past week, I was reflecting with a couple others about the baptismal font that serves as the base for the Advent candle wreath during the holiday season, which stands before you in the front of the room. This baptismal font, in its glorious hand-carved wood, dates back over 100 years. I couldn't help but think of all the people who have been baptized out of this font. Imagine if it could talk, the stories of baptisms this font could tell. I was reflecting on the history of baptisms that have taken place in this church, out of this font, while visiting this past week with Mrs. Doris Einbinder. Doris is a dedicated saint of this church, who at 94 years of age, joined the eternal host this weekend. It was likely this very font out of which she was baptized in 1927 – having been born into this congregation.

The stories the font could tell – the baptisms it could remember. Do you remember your baptism?

Baptism holds a special place in the life of the faithful. For us, in the United Methodist Church, baptism is one of two sacraments. For an act to be considered a sacrament of the church, Jesus must have both participated in the act himself and he must have instructed us to participate in it. Using this definition, considering the Biblical story, the two acts Jesus not only did, but also instructed us to do, are baptism and communion. Baptism is of utmost importance for the faithful. But beyond Jesus' instruction and participation, why?

Eleven years ago now, I had the opportunity travel to the Holy Land on a two-week pilgrimage. We visited all the expected sites, like the Church of the Nativity, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Mount of Olives, the Sea of Galilee, Caesarea Philippi, the Dead Sea, and others. Admittedly, I was a bit turned off by the over-touristic nature of the holy sites. Everywhere you went, there was a gift shop from which you could buy any number of olive wood carvings, Jewish memorabilia, post cards, trinkets and treasures. I obliged, and have my fair share of olive wood carvings at the house. But of all the places we travelled, from the churches we visited dedicated to the Biblical narrative of where Jesus performed miracles, to the sycamore tree

Zacchaeus surely climbed in Jericho, to the mountain from which Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, or where Jesus fed the 5,000 ... of all the places we visited over these fourteen days, do you know what place meant the most to me?

The place I appreciated most was a 3,000 year old staircase just outside the Old City in Jerusalem. It leads up to what is supposedly the House of Caiaphas, where it's said Jesus was taken after he was arrested in the Mount of Olives. But it's not the House of Caiaphas that interests me, it's the stairs. If you go just a half-mile further, you can be in the Old City and find the wailing wall, the Via Dolorosa, and the supposed sites of Jesus' crucifixion and his grave. And those are cool places to visit, but there's something about the hype of those places that makes them seem inauthentic to me. Like, does anyone really know without question those are the exact right spots? (Yes, I know there are people who claim to know without question those are the right spots.) I'd rather go to the stairs.

See, there's something about the stairs that reminds me of my baptism. The stairs, as old as they are, were without question due to carbon dating in place in the days of Jesus. They were likely not much different in the first century then they were when I was walking up them in 2008. There's something mundanely special about walking on steps that, without any certainty, Jesus may have walked up, but without question, followers of Jesus walked up. They are not of any specific historic significance – they haven't made a shrine out of the steps because that's where Jesus' blood dripped on the ground, unlike what they did build at the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem where Mary's milk supposedly spilt on the ground while nurturing Jesus. They haven't built an altar at the steps to mark the location where Jesus ran stairs for his rabbinical school sports teams, unlike the three churches they built in Cana to mark the location Jesus turned the water into wine.

No, the stairs for me are significant because the stairs aren't some dedicated special site that is of significance exclusively because it's a location of a miraculous sign. The stairs are significant because they symbolize for me participation in the community that is built surrounding Jesus. The stairs are important to me because they remind me that I don't have to be Jesus to be included in Jesus' community. The stairs are significant to me because they affirm that I don't have to be in the physical presence of Christ to know that I am included in the body of Christ. The stairs remind me of my baptism, because they remind me that my baptism connects me with a broader community than myself, and into a universal community that follows Christ.

Luke's recollection of Jesus' baptism takes on a bit of a different tone than we find in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Matthew and Mark would have appreciated a shrine being built at the location of Jesus' baptism. They hype Jesus' baptism up like a dramatic production. In both Matthew and Mark, the narrative seems to indicate that Jesus went to John with intentionality of being baptized and being claimed as the Son of God. For both writers, John the Baptist is present, but it's clear that the only thing that matters in the moment is that Jesus is there to be baptized and to be claimed by the voice of God and the descending Spirit as the Son of God. In these presentations, Jesus is singled out, and his baptism takes on a moment worthy of a dedicated memorial. Luke's story is a bit different.

Luke gives us a bit more information about the events surrounding Jesus' baptism. Luke lays out for us what it was about John's invitation to baptism that was so appealing – why it was so many people were flocking to him to be baptized.

Luke begins by telling us that both those who were filled with expectation, and others who were questioning in their hearts this John character, all went to see whether or not John was the messiah. The people were longing for someone who could fulfill the role of the expected savior. These are faithful Jews who knew well the promise of the prophets that God would send someone to be the messiah.

And have no doubt, these are people who greatly longed for a messiah. “Beginning two generations before Jesus and continuing beyond the time of Jesus and the New Testament writers, Rome aggressively expanded and consolidated its imperial power by conquering people of the eastern Mediterranean.”ⁱ Like kings who had come before at the promise of the prophets, the people of God yearned for someone to rescue them – to be their deliverer.

Have you ever wondered, how screwed up does a society have to be, how disastrous must times be, for people to seek deliverance from a crazed individual?

That's what Luke is telling us is happening. Remember, John is not your normal Jew. He lives outside of town; his meals consist of locusts and wild honey; his clothing was made of camel's hair, secured by a leather belt. He is not the person you would bet on to be the fulfillment of the prophets. By his appearance, and perhaps his track record, he's not the person you would first think is going to usher in God's salvation. But man, John preaches a good message. His stump speech is solid enough that the people flock to him. And they don't just want to hear what he has to say, they really begin to think he is the Messiah.

Perhaps some would welcome such attention and messianic proclamation.

Yet, as they flock to him, and as he takes them into the water to baptize them – to cleanse them in an act of repentance – he proclaims to them, “I am not the messiah you are looking for.” He proclaims to them that he is not worthy to be the messiah. Indeed, he is not worthy to be the servant or slave of the messiah – he is not worthy to untie the thong of the sandal of the messiah.

John doesn't claim the messiah-ship for himself, he directs the people to the One who is coming, who is more powerful, who will baptize them not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John is the last of the prophets, directing our attention not to his-self, but to coming of the Lord.

As we reflect back on this story some 2000 years in the future, we all know that the person John speaks of is Jesus. You can ask any Sunday School class, it doesn't matter the age of the children, “Who is the messiah?” Within the first three answers, they'll get it right: “the bible?”

“God?” “Jesus?” ... But the Jews didn’t know. The people flocking to John didn’t know it was Jesus. Perhaps they hadn’t read the rest of Luke’s gospel yet.

This is where things really get interesting in Luke’s gospel. The people are all flocking to John in the wilderness to be baptized and to repent – literally seeking the Messiah and wondering if John is he – and Jesus gets in line. Luke presents Jesus as having gone to be baptized as just “one of the crowd.” In verse 21, the gospel reads, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus had also been baptized and was praying ...” He’s just there among the crowd as if he’s trying to blend in. It’s like the first episode of Undercover Boss. Jesus goes as a normal Jew to be baptized by John, as if he is anticipating the coming Messiah just as everyone else in line.

Imagine the shock of everyone standing around when, after being baptized, Jesus walks up out of the water to the splitting of the heavens, the descending of a dove, and the voice of the heavens declaring, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (I can only imagine the person right behind Jesus in line to be baptized was screaming, “he cut in line!” I was the 100th customer!)

But this wasn’t some fluke declaration. As Rev. Melissa Bane Sevier, a Presbyterian pastor suggests, the river experience for Jesus wasn’t the first he’d thought about his purpose. But when he left, he seemed to know what he was about. The baptismal experience for Jesus was just confirmation of a purpose he had already considered.

Luke makes it clear that baptism is about identity. Just as it did for Jesus, “Baptism teaches us who we are – God’s beloved children – and confers upon us the promise of God’s unconditional regard.”ⁱⁱ Each of those who went to John to be baptized was seeking a new identity – a new promise under the guidance of a messiah who would offer clarity of identity, a purpose in the struggle of life, and a direction for how to live under the power of the one promised by the generations of the faithful.

Just as much as it is about personal identity, Luke makes clear baptism is about incorporation into this greater body. “Like Jesus, we are claimed by the Holy Spirit in our baptism, and like Jesus, we are called by our baptism into a community.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is why I like the stairs – they remind me of my baptism.

Like baptism, the stairs are not a place to just encounter Christ, they are a place where we are all invited to walk with Christ. They stairs are not a passive location to witness Christ, they invite active participation – one does not just stand on the stairs. Like baptism, you cannot climb the stairs alone – they are filled with the memory of saints who have been there before. Baptism incorporates you into a greater witness than your own. “We belong to God’s family, and baptism is a tangible sign of that.”^{iv}

Baptism is an invitation. It’s an invitation to know you are claimed. It’s a visible sign of God’s grace already at work in your life. There may be some who have not been baptized. Rest

assured, God still claims you; God still invites you to share in the witness of the faithful. If you have not, and desire to be baptized, let's talk and make that happen.

And for those who have – even if you can't think back on when, or where, or how – I invite you to remember your baptism. Remember how God claimed you; remember how God took the initiative to welcome you into the community of the faithful; remember that like Christ, you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, and so empowered to live a life that fulfills God's will in the world. You have been called and gifted to share in God's work – like Christ – to exemplify and make known God's love in the world. Remember. Remember.

Remember.

ⁱ Guy D. Have Jr. *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*. Eds. Cynthia A Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

ⁱⁱ David Lose. workingpreacher.org. Retrieved January 8, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deborah Black. *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*. Eds. Cynthia A Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

^{iv} Lose.