

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, January 10, 2016
Text: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703

608-256-9061 | www.fumc.org

There is something missing in Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus . . . John the Baptist. He is not there. In the Gospel according to Mark, John is front and center, standing in the River Jordan, pouring water on Jesus' head. He is there in Matthew's version, too. His presence is implied in John's gospel, as well; in fact, John spends a lot of time talking about the uncertainty the faithful have over who is the genuine savior, John the Baptist or Jesus. But in today's story John disappears in those intermediate verses we did not read.

Notice that the lectionary assigns for this Sunday verses 15 through 17, and verses 21 and 22 of the third chapter of Luke. So, what happens in verses 18 through 20? The lectionary is a three-year cycle of readings embraced by the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, and many mainline Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist Church, which leads us to address most of the major themes of the scripture in keeping with the liturgical calendar. So, there is an Old Testament reading, a psalm, a passage from the epistles, and a gospel reading assigned to each Sunday. We usually read two of the four, and use at least one of the others as a basis for the Call to Worship or the Community Prayer.

It always is interesting when verses are left out to look them up and see what has been omitted. In many cases it is miscellaneous material, but in this case it is the arrest of John the Baptist. We hear him in the first few verses preaching to the crowd at the riverside, insisting that he himself is not the messiah, a major point for Luke to stress; he is not worthy even to untie the messiah's sandals. "You will recognize him when the real messiah appears," John proclaims, "because he will be accompanied by the Holy Spirit." His words and actions will be like a winnowing fork that will separate the wheat from the chaff, sifting and winnowing, the work of God's spirit.

And then, John the Baptist disappears. Here is why: "Herod the ruler who had been rebuked by (John the Baptist) because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison." (:19,20) The entire family tree of the Herod the Great was rotted by incest, and John condemned the forbidden relationships within that household. So, he is thrown into jail, only to make a brief, truncated appearance on a platter in Mark's gospel, Chapter 6.

So, back to the riverside and Jesus' baptism – but, we missed it! Luke puts it in the past tense. "Now when all of the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized . . ." it already has taken place, and it is in the passive voice . . . "Jesus had been baptized." By whom? For what reason?

We have no idea by whom; it was not important to Luke. And for what reason was he baptized? It clearly was not a Christian baptism, simply by definition. There is nothing "Christian" about anything until after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And it could not have been to wash away his sins, if he was as uniquely holy as we say that he was. Most likely, he was taking part in a traditional purification ceremony along with all of the other faithful people of his tribe; Jesus was a good Jew.

But now, with that past tense, passive voice ritual completed, the action begins. As Jesus is praying, suddenly the heaven opens and the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. And God speaks, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Another translation has it, "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." It is a blessing, a baptism by God's love that sets Jesus free to be the servant of all. A paradox of a sort, isn't it – to be set free to serve, but that is the freedom offered in God's love. Notice that this blessing comes before Jesus ostensibly has done anything; his ministry has not yet begun. So, God's blessing is not a reward for good work accomplished; rather, it is the affirmation that empowers Jesus to begin the good and mighty work God expects from him.

Our sacrament of baptism now 2000 years later still celebrates God's gift of unconditional love. That is what allows us to baptize infants, as well as others who are older. We do not baptize an infant because that child has accomplished great things in life and developed a compelling Christian character. No, we baptize an infant because God's love is so all-embracing that this child already is blessed, and God is happy about it.

Baptism is not magic. I one time had a frantic mother call me and ask if I would come to the house quickly to baptize her newborn infant in order to keep it from crying all night. I had to tell her that baptism is not behavior modification. Baptism does not cure colic. It does not cast a spell over a child and protect that child from the challenges of life. Baptism is a sacred celebration that dramatizes God's happiness over the life of the one being baptized, no matter at what age.

Imagine a happy God. Many of us have been infected with a stern image of an angry God. "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God" Jonathan Edwards imagined us to be; we are like spiders being dangled over an open fire. Is God going to drop us into the fire or give us a little bit longer to repent? God -- out to get us, out to do us in. But here in baptism is the voice from heaven expressing joy, sending us forth to live. "Do not be afraid; you are free to be."

And this is not a new revelation about God, God having a desire to bless the people. In our reading today from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah we have God's message given to the faithful who have struggled to live honorably in exile. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine." Yes, you have passed through the waters and walked through the fire of human struggle, but my blessing will come to you like a reunion with you all returning from the east and the west, the north and the south. My happiness will be fulfilled when my sons from far away

and my daughters from the ends of the earth are together again. Do not be afraid.” Free to be who God has called us to be and to be that person in service to others . . . the power of blessing.

The power of blessing to set us free . . . when I was a senior here at the University of Wisconsin I decided to go to seminary, at least to give it a try. When I was a freshman I had a different goal in mind, becoming a medical doctor. Qualitative analysis proved to me that there is more to being a physician than having a good bedside manner. I thought of other directions in which to go, took some classes to see if I would like them, discovered that I did not or was not gifted in that way. There is a lot of “sifting and winnowing” that goes on in each student’s academic life.

So, I went with the one thing I knew I loved to do, to read and write. I became an English major, and that has proven to be a wonderful choice for all that I have done since. But that did not lead me toward ministry; summer experiences in my home church in Libertyville, Illinois, had great impact, and so did you here at First United Methodist Church back in 1965 and 1966. I am sure that you did not know how important you were to me back then, and how formative my conversations with J. Ellsworth Kalas, one of the pastors at the time, would turn out to be.

But, I tell you all of this to emphasize the power of blessing to set us free. I was very concerned about telling my father about my desire to go to seminary because it would mean that I would receive a deferment from the military draft. Back in those days the Vietnam War defined the lives of all male university students. Do not register for less than a full load; do not drop a class; do not fail a class. There were protests, draft card burnings, battles in the streets over who went to war and who did not.

Now, my father and I had never talked about any of this. He had served in World War II in Europe, and after the war was over he returned to our family and took up where he left off, selling paint for Sherwin-Williams. He seldom talked about the war except to tell some funny stories of his assignment to repatriate soldiers who had been captured by the Nazis and then left to fend for themselves as the Nazi troops withdrew.

But I revered Dad, I still do; decades after his death I still have his Army jacket hanging in the attic. As a young boy I simply assumed that I had two obligations in life: to make enough money to support a family of four, and to serve in the military. So, I worried in this final university year that I would let Dad down if I went to seminary and incidentally got a deferment. It was not a political issue; it was about honoring one’s father and mother.

I asked Dad to come to Madison and take me out to dinner, what all savvy students think of doing. We went to the Nob Hill restaurant that sat on a ridge just south of the Beltline with a beautiful view of downtown Madison. I told him about my interest in going to seminary and my worry that, by doing so, I would disappoint him. He said, “Phil, you do not owe me a thing. I did what I had to do; you do what you feel called to do. And, for what it’s worth, stay as far away from Vietnam as you can.”

An enormous burden lifted off of my shoulders as if a heavenly dove had descended and gripped my dread in its beak and flew away. The power of a blessing to set one free to be. “You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

In religious terms we talk about that as “grace,” God’s grace that sets us free to live fully. It is that grace, that freedom, which resides in this water in the font. We hold baptisms in public worship, not private family services, because God’s message is meant for all of us: “I love you; I am pleased with you; go freely to serve others.” This is a morning in which we all are called to remember our baptism and be thankful, not necessarily the actual ritual of baptism, but the fact that God has baptized us with the Holy Spirit of freedom to live fully.

At the conclusion of this worship service we will carry the bowl of consecrated water to the back door so that when we leave this holy place we can touch the water to our foreheads, our lips, our hearts, and be thankful. The parish church in Epworth, England, where John Wesley was baptized, is designed like many old buildings where the baptismal font is at the entrance to the sanctuary. That location reminds us that baptism is a point of entry for us; it also serves as a reminder of God’s benediction.

It took John Wesley many years to get the message of God’s grace as symbolized in the water of baptism. He, like many of us, grew up in a meritocracy. He had to earn his way forward in life. “Nothing is given to you for free; you have to deserve the good things that come your way.” And how he tried to earn God’s love. As a student at Oxford University he would get up every morning at 5:00 to pray. Then he would go off to the local prison to try to save the souls of those who were about to be executed. Then he would spend part of the day studying the Bible. At night he regularly got together with a handful of students to search the scriptures for encouragement to stay true to God’s path. This was so irritating to most of the students in his Christ Church College residence at Oxford that they laughingly called Wesley and his small group “Methodists.” The name stuck.

The big epiphany came for him, the light bulb in the cartoon bubble went off, when he realized that he had it exactly backward. He was doing all of the right things for all of the wrong reasons. He was trying to earn God’s love by serving the needs of others, when in fact, God’s love already had been given to him (God’s world is not a meritocracy), and out of gratitude for that love he ought to serve the needs of others. He ended up doing the same things, and even much more, but now out of joy, not self-justification.

His baptism in that small church in Epworth meant that he ought not be afraid, but rather in the freedom of the Holy Spirit, be the one God had created him to be. St. Augustine said it before Wesley discovered it, “Love God and do as you please,” knowing that by loving God we discover what we please to do conforms to God’s hopes for us.

This water, this baptism visually and audibly, dramatizes for us God’s happiness over our lives – if only we could be as happy with our own lives as God is! Be not afraid; God’s blessing sets us free to be, and in serving others, we discover just who we are. Amen.