

“While Praying” – Lk 3:15-17,21-22 – Jan 10/16

As we roll into the new year, and roll along in the Church Year, we soon celebrate this Sunday dealing with the baptism of Jesus. That seems a perfectly normal thing to do; however the gospel text from Luke that brings us the story not only provides one of the key scriptural elements defining both our theology and our Christology but also at the same time presents us with two daunting challenges for preaching or study. On the one hand this crucial text is agonizingly brief; on the other hand it contains a distraction that deflects attention from the heart of the incident. That distraction? The ominous bit about the winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire. At this point many if not most people go “whoa!” and read no further, missing the really key part that follows.

So often the texts that deal with foundational parts of our faith are so short, so incomplete, so lacking in detail, and this text for today in Luke’s gospel is an almost perfect example of this phenomenon. Luke gives us a relatively lengthy account of what John the Baptist had to say, but such a few short words detailing Jesus’ baptism. Why is this? Is Luke perhaps responding to some difficulty in the early church over the issue of Jesus being baptized? This definitely is one possibility, because both the method and the meaning of his baptism were key issues at the time and indeed continue to be troublesome even today

Attempts by the early church to understand and define their identity resulted in a major struggle over the relationship between John and Jesus, and the implications of John baptizing Jesus. The problem was that in the act of baptizing Jesus it seems as though John has a ‘superior’ role. We can easily imagine the conversations that ensued in the living rooms and around the kitchen tables in Jerusalem, and throughout Judea and Samaria, with family, friends and neighbours arguing over whether it was best to follow the strictures of John or to heed the call of Christ to compassionate service.

That this issue was still being strongly argued by the time the Gospels were written is shown by the care that the Gospel authors take to affirm Jesus’ superiority to John. Luke is careful not to give John the title of ‘Baptist’ or ‘Baptiser’, and takes special pains to quote John as declaring Jesus being infinitely superior to himself. In a curious shift from the other Gospels, Luke even goes so far as to remove John from the scene of the baptism, putting him in prison (in the verses we skipped), opening the door to the question of whether he understood John as being the one who baptized Jesus, or whether it was an anonymous ‘someone else’.

That struggle over the power and place of Jesus still is one of the key issues for the church today, both within the church and between the church and the outside world. Inside the church strong tensions arise from differences between the perceived importance to be assigned to John’s strident calls to repentance versus Christ’s affirming declaration of new life. Those differences seem to center around whether we are more likely to be chaff and rejected, or whether we are wheat and lovingly selected. From the outside world the church is challenged by belief systems that deny the power of Christ and even the existence of God. These external struggles often center around the source of life-giving power, and of course today, when we are so heavily affected by the “Age of Reason”, the philosophical revolution started in the 1700’s, it is somewhat sad but not surprising that so many people believe the source of that power is not from God but is inherent within ourselves.

Let’s refocus, however, and come back to Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism, or more properly, the events around that baptism. Perhaps it is just as well that Luke takes a minimalist approach here; after all, how can mere words add to the significance of an event that describes the heavens opening up, the Holy Spirit descending, and the voice of God speaking? For Luke

this is literally the crowning moment, but I'm sure he understands that there is a subtle problem associated with making too much of the moment, and that problem is one of falling into what is called an adoptionist view of Christ as the Son of God. That adoptionist view holds that Christ started out completely human, and only became divine at this moment of 'adoption' by God. Luke is very clear that Jesus was one with God from the beginning, and that his baptism was at one and the same time both an affirmation of that timeless divinity and a transition. Recall Luke's description of the incident in the temple when Jesus was twelve years old, an incident that highlighted Jesus' transition into young manhood. Here the transition is into full adulthood, an affirmation of him being the Messiah, truly the Son of God.

For Luke, what's important is the epiphany of this occasion, the revealing moment, the opening up of the heavens signaling the launching of a new age, the beginning of Jesus' ministry and mission. The heavenly voice speaks directly and thus privately to Jesus; but the descent of the Holy Spirit is a public event, visible to all in a form "like a dove". It is a visible infusion of power, from the source of all power, our God who affirms Jesus as Son. An infusion of power that is later echoed in the 'baptism of wind and fire' upon those in the upper room following Christ's resurrection, and in the gift of the Holy Spirit to the believers throughout the ages.

We should note again however that here scripture offers not one word about the mechanics of Jesus' baptism, nothing about total immersion, white robes, splashing on the shore, ladles or pails, incantations, nothing. We know that the word baptism is related to the Hebrew word for ritual washing, and is elsewhere used in the context of dipping into water, but none of the texts go into any details of the mechanics. We need to remember that the power or the 'active ingredient' in the baptism is not us – it's not a function of how well or how 'purely' we perform the act. The mechanics are ours; the power is God's. When we get too wound up in our magnificent robes, when we are too impressed with our own fine words, when we are inflated with our own importance or proud in our penitence, we need to recall that although the actions are ours, the power is God's.

While the signs at our own baptisms were considerably more muted (joyful of course, but less spectacular than described here), we do indeed share with Christ in our baptisms, and we share also the joy of receiving the Holy Spirit. Baptism is one of the two sacraments in our denomination; as part of the Reformed Tradition we hold that the crucial action in the sacrament is not ours, but God's, acting through his Holy Spirit, a gift freely given as promised by Christ, given not partially or conditionally or measured out according to some human-defined formula. We do not believe that baptism is a divine inoculation, nor do we dole out God's Holy Spirit like a cough medicine: e.g. two tablespoons of salvation in response to one "I believe". In the rite and sacrament of baptism we instead celebrate the action of God fulfilling the request of his Son Jesus gifting the Holy Spirit upon those who would receive that gift.

And since we share with Christ the experience of the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, so too do we share with him the experience of being commissioned into ministry and mission. Jesus' baptism was the signal and the start of the events of his proclamation of the good news, his gathering disciples around him to help, his ministry to the sick and the poor and the sinners, his journey to the cross, and his resurrection from and victory over death itself, returning to send his disciples out as apostles. Being joined with him through our baptism we are joined with him in that ministry and mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit, each and every one of us called to proclaim the good news, to minister to the sick, the lonely, the hungry, the rejected. Our baptismal certificates are not honours to be framed and displayed on the wall; they are green cards, work permits, conscription directives, and marching orders.

Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of a new creation, a new age, the start of a new way for God to express his love for his people. Here we are near the beginning of the church year, the start of a new calendar year, another year in the cycle of the life of the church. What better time to celebrate anew what God has done for us in Christ, to celebrate his gift of the Holy Spirit to us? What better time is there for us, renewed, re-energized, re-commissioned to set out on a new journey of ministry and mission? None of us can see with precise clarity what lies down that path, but every one of us can be assured that we can and will travel it both empowered and protected by the Spirit.

Over the next few months and years we expect, with God's help, to wend our way through new and challenging yet exciting transitions in the life of Central Church. We have the opportunity not only to rebuild the foundation of our building, but also to build on the foundation of our existing vision and to extend it as we find ourselves called. We are moving forward in the kingdom drawing upon the strengths and talents and energies and power that we share as gifts from God. Some parts of this journey may at times be and will be difficult, or challenging. There have been and will be times when we feel overwhelmed by the changes, and the path will seem terribly unfamiliar. Other times we will be so overwhelmed by the sheer joy of working in God's kingdom, empowered by his Holy Spirit, working hand in hand with Christ that we will no longer notice that it's a new and different path. Through it all we can count upon Christ's promise of His being there with us, upon his promise of power from that ultimate source of all renewable energy, upon Christ's promise of the comfort and sustaining power of God's Holy Spirit.

Who knows where this new journey will lead? God knows. Christ knows. The Holy Spirit knows. We don't know, and can't know, so we take it as an article of faith that we will be both guided and protected in our journey. But before we set out on this new path, there is one other important point Luke wanted us to note, and that is that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus while he was praying. The prayer life of Jesus was very important to Luke, because he makes many references to it, but not the prayer life of Jesus alone. Just as Jesus was in prayer when the Holy Spirit descended, so the church, awaiting the promised power of the Spirit, was (Acts 1:8,14) and should continue to be in constant prayer.

Let us then, emboldened by Christ's promises and empowered by the Holy Spirit, prayerfully continue in this new journey in the ministry of Jesus, the same Jesus proclaimed Son of God at his baptism, and proclaimed Christ the Saviour at his resurrection.