

**The Baptism of Our Lord, January 13<sup>th</sup> 2019**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Summit, New Jersey**  
**"God's Beloved" – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Grace be to you and peace from our Creator, Redeemer and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” How many times did you hear that question when you were a kid? And how many times have you asked that question of the children in your life? When I was a child, I wanted to be a doctor. I loved our family doctor, Dr. Dixon and what he did was so fascinating to me that I wanted to be like him. He gave people shots, or put Band-Aids on scrapes, or gave people pills that made them better. He was a healer. He wore a white coat and always had a stethoscope around his neck. And in his office there were all sorts of interesting things --- glass jars filled with flat sticks that looked like popsicle sticks, cotton balls, a thermometer in a jar of alcohol for sterilization --- and always, always, his black doctor bag at the ready for a home visit.

Every year for Christmas, I got a black or red doctor bag too, because I was going to be a doctor. I think my parents had as much expectation about the possibility as I did. In fact, my desire to be a physician lasted until 10<sup>th</sup> grade biology and the dissection of a baby pig. Between the formaldehyde smell and the need to cut, plans for my chosen vocation vanished rather quickly!

John the Baptizer's parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah knew what he was going to be when he grew up; the angel Gabriel had already told them. He was going to be a prophet and a preacher so he could point people to the coming Messiah. The angel said, “He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Yes, John's parents knew what he was going to be when he grew up; but the people who

followed him didn't know. Some thought that John might even be the Messiah that they were expecting.

But John cleared that up for them when he was baptizing people in the wilderness: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." "Nope, I'm not the Messiah you're waiting for; I'm just the one whose job it is to tell you to get ready for the Messiah because he's on the way."

Now take a look at your bulletin because I want you to notice something. Look at the Gospel reading that the lectionary editors selected for today. It's Luke 3:15-17; 21-22. Don't you wonder what happened to verses 18-20? Maybe you haven't paid any attention to it until now, but sometimes it's really interesting to see and hear what the lectionary folks left out. Here's what those verses say:

*"So, with many other exhortations, he (John) proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him 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."*

Not only is John *not* the Messiah; he's in prison. In the other three gospels, John baptizes Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, we don't know who baptized Jesus; all we know is that he *was* baptized. We don't know why Jesus was baptized either. What we *do* know from Luke is what happens *after* the baptism, because in some respects, that's where the rubber hits the road, isn't it? While the baptism itself is important, it's what happens *after* Jesus is baptized and *after* we are baptized that makes the difference in our lives and in the world.

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When our clergy colleagues met last Tuesday to study the Bible lessons for this Sunday, I asked, “What do you think Jesus was praying about?” I’d never really paid much attention to this part of the text before, but Luke says that after Jesus had been baptized and was praying that he was affirmed and confirmed as the Son of God, the Beloved. But what was he praying about? Was he praying that through his baptism he might be strengthened to do what God had created him to do? Was he praying for guidance? Was he praying for the kinds of spiritual gifts that some of us received on our Epiphany stars last Sunday --- For courage? Compassion? Joy? Trust? Was he praying about those whose lives he would touch with the good news that he was called to preach and live?

Honestly, we don’t know what Jesus was praying for, but it was and is a good thing that we should pray when we’re baptized --- pray for strength for our journeys through life because God knows that our lives are filled with both unexpected trials and tribulations and with joys that are unspeakable. And the times and cultural context in which we live only adds to our anxiety and fatigue.

Who doesn’t feel a deep sense of compassion and frustration for those 800,000 federal employees who aren’t being paid because of the government shut down? And regardless of how you feel about the “wall”, who among God’s people wants to see little children who have travelled hundreds of miles with their families who are seeking a better life, be either separated or detained?

We baptized folks definitely need to pray; and sometimes our prayers need to be like the kind that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke about. Heschel was born in Poland but managed to escape to London before the Nazis invaded. His mother and sisters died in the Holocaust and this tragedy marked his life and shaped his theology. Rabbi Heschel believed that it was important for people of faith to work along with God to create a better world; and this belief led him to march alongside Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr., in the historic Selma to Montgomery March. When he wrote about the march later, he said, “I felt my legs were praying.”

His words continue to challenge people today who are praying with their legs at our southern border. Pastor Heidi Neumark, one of St. John’s daughters, was travelling to the border this week to bear witness to the suffering of thousands who have fled their homes seeking solace and safety. While we may not be traveling with her and so many others with our legs, I do believe we are called to travel with them in our prayers. You see, St. Paul reminds us that when one of us suffers, all of us suffer; and that when one of us rejoices, all of us rejoice.

Today is the day the church celebrates as the Baptism of Our Lord. We know that after his baptism, Jesus prayed with his lips and he prayed with his legs. He traveled all around the Judean countryside-calling people to turn to God and to work for the justice and wholeness that God desires for everyone, especially the poorest of the poor. We’ll hear Jesus’ sermon about that in a few weeks, when, reading from the prophet Isaiah he says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...”

I think Jesus praying after his baptism was getting him ready to preach, teach, and live the good news. That’s what we’re praying for today too. We’re praying that our baptisms continue to make us ready to be little Christ’s in the world, serving our neighbors in need. We’re praying that when little Aubrey is baptized in our next service (in a few minutes) that she’s going to model her life after her nana, who models her life after Jesus. We’re praying that all of us -- Aubrey’s parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sponsors and our whole St. John’s community, will do our best to keep the promises that

make to her so that she will learn to trust God and to let her light shine so others will see God through her life.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' public ministry hadn't even begun; he hadn't done anything that we know of that would have made his life an exceptional life up to this point. But no sooner had he been baptized than the heavens were opened and he heard a voice --- a powerful voice claiming and naming him forever --- "You are my Son, the beloved with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus needed to hear that voice; that voice of confirmation and affirmation. For the voice from heaven confirmed his identity as Son of God, and affirmed who he was --- the Beloved with whom God is well pleased. We need to hear that word too, brothers and sisters. God longs for us to hear and receive that voice, for we too are the beloved sons and daughters of God, with whom God is well pleased.

So own it, and live it, friends. God says to each of us today, "You belong to me. You are mine. I love you..." "You are marked, signed with the cross of Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit and today and every day, says God, "I deliver you to the world." So let your lights shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Amen.

*Pastor Gladys G. Moore*

