

13 January 2018

Holy or Sacred
Luke 3:1-22

The liturgical calendar begins with Jesus' birth and follows his life on earth up until Easter, the celebration of his resurrection. In that time-line, today is the day designated for the Baptism of the Lord. We read from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 3, verses 1-22:

³In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. "'

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "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. ¹⁷His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But 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, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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."

You're probably familiar with this wild man, John the Baptizer. He lived out in the desert, like the old prophet Elijah. He called for the people to turn from their evil ways, like the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah. He denounced the immorality of kings and priests, like, well, like most of the prophets. And, in case we hadn't noticed John's resemblance to the prophets, Luke introduces him with a quotation from the Book of Isaiah. Jesus even refers to him once as a prophet.

But here's something we often forget. John was also a priest. His father – Luke is careful to make clear – was a priest named Zechariah. John's birth was announced to Zechariah by the angel Gabriel, while Zechariah was performing priestly duties in the temple. So John would have been raised in that heritage, learning the rituals of the temple and the priestly laws of purity. Even baptism, John's signature move, was originally a priestly ritual. Oh, yes. Baptism had been around long before John started doing it. It was an established temple practice, a ritual of cleansing. You see, the Jewish teaching of the time was that a Jew could be made unclean by merely touching a Gentile, even by accident, and Judea was an occupied country, filled with foreigners who worshiped other gods. Moreover, most Jews then (as today) lived in countries other than Judea, countries where they were *surrounded* by Gentiles and their impure practices and unacceptable gods. So when Jews came to the temple – whether from far away or just from the next town over – the likelihood was that they were officially "unclean." So, the priests had built around the perimeter of the temple certain places of immersion where good Jews could symbolically wash off the impurities of the Gentile world before entering the holy place. So, yeah, baptism had been around a while before John. It was a method by which Jews made themselves holy – separate from all the defiling influences of the world – before they brought their sacrifices and fulfilled their vows according to the priestly laws.

John would have known all about this baptism, growing up in a priestly family. So it's worth noting that he does it all wrong. First of all, he doesn't do it at the holy place. Verse 3 specifies that he went out and did his baptisms in "all the region." Not in designated and controlled baptismal pools but in the river, where people wash and where fish and birds live and eat and poop and die. Not anyone's idea of purity. But that's nothing. Look *who* he baptizes. After telling the good Jewish crowds – children of Abraham – who had come out to see him that they are "sons of snakes," he goes on to baptize despised tax-collectors. And soldiers. Soldiers. The soldiers, in case you hadn't put this together, would not have been Jews at all. The Roman legions did not permit other sorts of soldiers in their occupied territories. So temple baptism was to cleanse Jews from contact with Gentiles; John was baptizing Gentiles. And then he started teaching, but not like the priests taught. John's teachings were not about how to perform sacrifices in the temple, how to maintain one's purity, how to avoid defilement. His instructions for tax-collectors and soldiers and everyone else were about how to go about their normal life with integrity. Tax-collectors, be honest. Soldiers, don't abuse your power. John didn't teach people how to separate themselves and be holy. He taught them how to follow God right in the middle of all the uncleanness of the world. And then, in case the Gentile baptisms hadn't already made this clear, John announces to the Jews in the crowd, "By the way, don't think you're special because you're children of Abraham. God can raise up children of Abraham from these rocks. Being a Jew means nothing. Repent and be forgiven of your sins, like everyone else." See what I mean? John really did baptism wrong. He took a ritual that had been designed to set

God's people apart from others, and he turned it into a service of cleansing for all people, insiders and outsiders together, before sending them out, forgiven and whole, to live lives of integrity in the world.

And it wasn't just John who did this. Jesus taught the same thing. Jesus didn't baptize people himself, but in Matthew 28 he tells his disciples to do so. "As you are going into all the world," he says in the Great Commission, "make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." For Jesus, too, baptism is not a thing that you do in the holy place; baptism is a thing you do as you go out to the unholy places. And the church did. In the book of Acts, for instance, we see Philip stopping at a pool by the side of the road to baptize a man from Africa. Baptism was not about purity or holiness for the insiders; it was about reaching out to touch and transform those out there.

That's what baptism meant to the early church, for a few years. But it didn't take long for it to revert to its old meaning, a mark of separation between insiders and outsiders. Within a century or two, the early church was treating it as something exclusive, a rite of membership. Rules were made, limiting who could be granted this honor, and certain prerequisites were put into place before it was possible. A few years more, and people were teaching that baptism was the deciding step in salvation. Baptized people and *only* baptized people went to heaven. (By the way, that is *not* what we teach.) Again, baptism had become a dividing line. A few more steps were added, making it even more restricted: it could only be done in official holy shrines and could only be performed by official, approved personnel. And look where we were. By the Middle Ages, baptism had become for Christians exactly what it had been for the priestly hierarchy of 1st century Judaism: a method of separating believers from the world and a way to distinguish the faithful from the infidel.

So here's my heresy. Here's the thought I keep having that I might have forgotten to mention when I interviewed with the United Methodist Board of Ordained Ministry: what if we've been doing baptism wrong? What if baptism wasn't supposed to be just an initiation rite, bringing people into the club? What if it was supposed to be a blessing for those we are preparing and sending out to live Christ everywhere else? What if baptism is supposed to be a summons to repentance, issued to all, and a call to live a life of integrity in the world? That would make baptism not a one-and-done but something we carry with us our entire lives, something we put on every time we wake up in the morning to face the world's uncleanness, every time we are tempted to cut corners on character or to speak something less than the truth or to take advantage of someone else's weakness.

That would be different. Baptism would be daily commitment, not just a thing that got taken care of a long time ago. At this point in the service, then, I might say, "Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we are here to celebrate the gift of life and the gift of love which comes to us from God. Through the sacrament of baptism, God adopts us again today into his family, writes us today into a new chapter in the story of salvation, and makes us new this morning once more through water and the Spirit." And then we could add, "This is a gift, offered to us at any age, even before we understand it, and through God's sanctifying grace, it is a gift that we carry with us. We are sent out to live as disciples, bringing the holiness of love, compassion, courage, and integrity to a world that cries out for that sort of baptism."

And this daily baptism would come with a charge to each of us, as individuals. A charge to our nurses and physicians and counselors to listen well and patiently and with compassion –

no matter how many times the patient has gone against doctor's advice. A charge for our teachers, and our students, to listen and care and to grow, not just in knowledge but in grace. A charge for those of us who deal with other people's money to be honest, and to those of us who sell goods or provide services, to do our best work. A charge for all of us who buy goods or pay for services to treat those who serve us as children of God instead of tools for our convenience. A charge for those of us with authority not to abuse it or to manipulate others. A charge for all of us to read and watch and listen to and Google those things that draw us toward God, not drive us away. Like John's baptism, ours would be a charge to be different than our defiled world.

If we did add this second level to baptism, then at this point I might say: "I baptize you all today in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And to all I say, live simply and justly, be fair and honest in your business dealings, loving with your friends, welcoming with strangers. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. I baptize you and send you out in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

That's what we might do if we understood baptism as more than just a one-time thing, but that's not how we generally teach baptism, if we teach it at all. Whatever John the Baptist might have done with his baptism, we usually stop well before he did.

But if we did it that way, we might draw a distinction between two words. We might call something *holy* when it is kept pure and separate from defilement, and we might say that something is *sacred* when it is sent out in the middle of everything to transform what it touches. And we might say it's about time for the church to stop being holy and start being sacred, going forth into all the world, making disciples and baptizing them.

Final word: Most of us here have at some point been baptized. Well, we aren't going to do it again. But I do want to add a second level. Baptism needs to be more than an initiation ritual; it is also an anointing for service in an unclean world. See, here is water. As you go today, I invite you to dip your fingers in it and remember that. We don't get to stay here in the sanctuary. We belong out there, in the world, so it wouldn't hurt to take the touch of God with you.