

1/10/10

Epiphany 1C - Luke 3:15-22; Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17

"Hearing Voices" Pastor Seth D. Jones

"You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." These are the words Jesus hears when he is baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit descends upon him as he is praying. There is a lot going on here, just as there is a lot going on in each of our baptisms. These words, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased" are meant for Jesus. There is no indication anyone else heard these words except for Jesus. This tells us that, while the external act of baptism is public, the experience of baptism is intensely personal. It is this intensely personal and subjective experience of baptism which creates all kinds of doctrinal issues in the history of the faith. From the idea that the act of baptism transfers the grace of Christ to us directly and is therefore not present until the act of baptism to the idea that only someone who has a clear idea of why they are being baptized can be welcomed into the community of faith to the idea that any Christ-like activity is a baptism in the fire of the Holy Spirit, the intensely personal experience of baptism makes it a consuming act of certainty for many people.

It is this moment all our talk about wisdom and wonder has been leading up to these past few weeks and the reason for this is because when we are dealing with the intensely personal and the deeply subjective, we must have a way of seeing beyond those experiences into something more objective and inclusive of other people's experience. The personal experience, however, stands as a personal testimony and outward expression of what we are assured of by God - We are beloved and with you God is well pleased.

The difficult thing about all this is this: What we know to be true for ourselves by way of our baptism, That we are adopted by God and in God we find our rest, our confirmation and our assurance by way of Christ's love for all of us, is what we want to be true for everyone. The question becomes: Since I experienced this truth for myself, is it true for others whether or not they experience what I experienced or must they also experience what I experienced in order to know what I know about God's love and mercy?

I don't have a good answer for the question. I don't fully understand what happens in baptism, but I do know more is happening than just being sprinkled or dunked in the water. Martin Luther and John Calvin say the water combined with the Word of God is what makes baptism a definitive and complete act in the eyes of God. I agree with them. It is a spiritual event which says to the community of faith, this child, this person, is claimed by God through the work of Jesus Christ. It says to all people who see it, God has taken you in as God's beloved and with you God is well pleased.

Martin Luther, who was an Augustinian monk before he became the great reformer of the church, used to be overcome with guilt and worry and fear with regard to his eternal salvation. It is strange to our ears to hear about someone who cares so much about such a thing. Most of the great reformers and dissidents of the church, including our Puritan ancestors in the Congregational tradition, cared deeply about this. Be that as it may, as a monk Luther was consumed with fear. He thought these doubts and fears were the voice of Satan seeking to drive him from the faith.

Fortunately, he had a caring and loving mentor who told him, "Whenever you hear those voices, you must put yourself completely at the mercy of Christ and remember he has claimed you in your baptism. Whenever you hear these things in your mind, say over and over again, 'O Lord, Jesus Christ, I am yours.' This is your assurance and you know it because of your baptism." This was the beginning of Luther's transformation into a scholar and reformer of the Christian faith, the reclamation of the truth of his baptism.

It does not matter then whether we have been baptized as an infant with no understanding of what is going on, or whether we have been baptized as an older child or adult with limited understanding. The truth of God's claim upon us is complete in our baptism. This truth is what is made public in the act of baptism. The internal experience, the personal experience, is what we must discover for ourselves. This can and should take a lifetime. Our baptism - the remembered experience of it or the understanding of the vows made on your behalf when you were baptized - is how we know we share a life in Christ.

Let me tell you about my baptism. I had a very good relationship with my pastor as I was growing up. Reverend Jake Close of 1st Congregational Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin provided a listening ear and a level head during my experience of adolescence. Being curious and inquisitive, my best friend and I would explore neighborhood churches and explored all kinds of other traditions. During this exploration, I became enamored of the Buddhist tradition. I studied the writings of Buddhism and started doing Zen meditation on my own. I went in to talk to Pastor Close about what I was doing and he told me I should keep exploring it. From the very beginning, then, my experience of Christian faith was one of permission, freedom and trust, rather than one of rules, restrictions and rejection.

A few weeks after my meeting with Pastor Close, he called my parents to see whether or not my sister and I had been baptized. My parents had decided early on those decisions should be ours to make, not anyone else's. This, even though my mother grew up Episcopalian and my father Presbyterian. So Jake came by the house and explained what baptism was to myself and my sister and we both agreed to it. I was 16 years old when we hiked to the top of the hill behind our house in Eau Claire. Pastor Close spoke the words of baptism - "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit". I had a profound experience in that moment and have spent a good long time trying to understand what exactly took place there. It was indeed a very personal and intense experience.

Soon after my baptism, I began to feel called to the ministry. I wasn't quite clear on what such a thing meant and the fact it took me a false start at 23 years old and a rediscovery of my call again at 38 testifies to the reality that, while baptism is a complete claim upon us by God, our living into said claim can be a circuitous and tumultuous path.

Last week, we spoke of paradoxes of the faith. How do we stand in the midst of great paradoxes and walk forward with some confidence in our faith and trust in God? Martin Luther and Calvin say we can only move forward as Christians by relying on the promises of our baptism. And baptism itself exists as a great paradox - the intensely personal and subjective experience is what grounds us in the objective reality of the community of God.

Like young pups who yank and pull at the leash, or like the horse who chomps and bucks at the bridle, or the child who says "No" to the least provocation, we do not accept the claim God has upon us easily. And that is as it should be. God knows we are more often in rebellion against ourselves and God than in conformity with God's will. Baptism is a frightening thing. And it is a beautiful thing.

Back in the early days of the church, baptism had still not taken on the cultural expectation it carries now. Last summer, I had the opportunity to do a baptism for a couple in Cooke City. I asked the father why he wanted his kids, who were 6 and 4 months old, to be baptized. His answer was, "Because everyone in my family has been baptized in this church." He really didn't have any idea what was behind baptism and what is going on there. This is a difficult moment for a pastor. How do I explain something which isn't completely clear to myself? How do I maintain my integrity in what I do believe about baptism with someone who just wants to do something for its outer show? I still don't have good answers to those questions. What I do know is, whether a baby is being baptized or an adult is being baptized, we are making promises and commitments as a community to the child or adult. We make promises and vows to uphold them in the faith, to renounce the ways of evil in the world, to teach them the ways of God. We acknowledge that, on the basis of those promises, they are welcomed into the community of God's children. And baptism is a wholly Christian act, so we know Jesus Christ has something to do with it.

So as I was saying, back in the early days of the church, baptism was a major undertaking. A person, usually an adult, became attracted to the new Christian faith. Perhaps they were hungry and a Christian fed them. Perhaps they were ill and a Christian came to take care of them. Perhaps they were homeless or a refugee and a Christian took them into their house. So they start coming to services. At a certain point in the service all the unbaptized were ushered out, and the baptized partook of communion together. Once the interested person became more interested, they were given a mentor, who would guide them in the particulars of the faith. This was a 3-year process, a process which is today called catechism. After 3 years, the neophyte, or Christian-in-training, would be given the opportunity to enter fully into the faith by baptism. Most baptisms took place at midnight on Easter Sunday. Those waiting to be baptized would stand in a darkened corridor, which back then meant pitch black. Through the walls, they could hear the chanting and praying of the church. Then the neophyte would be led down the corridor by their mentor to a tub or pool off to the side of the main church. They would be stripped. Naked and cold, the Christian-to-be would be asked the traditional questions of baptism:

Do you desire to be baptized into the faith and family of Jesus Christ?

And they would respond, *I do.*

And the mentor would be asked, *Are you ready with God's help to guide and encourage this person by counsel and example, in prayer and love, to follow the ways of Jesus Christ?*

And the sponsor would respond, *I do.*

Then the pastor would ask the candidate, *Do you renounce Satan and the ways of evil and desire the freedom of new life in Christ?*

And the candidates would respond, *I do.*

Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

And the candidate would respond, *I do.*

Do you promise by the grace of God to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the ways of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?

And the candidate would respond, *I promise, with the help of God.*

Do you promise according to the grace given you, to grow in the Christian faith and to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating Christ's presence and furthering Christ's mission in the whole world?

And the candidate would respond, *I promise with the help of God.*

Then the pastor would pray over the candidate. The candidate would step into the water, which was probably very cold. The pastor would have the candidate kneel or would lean them back. Then the pastor would push the candidate under water. Virtually all baptisms back then were full immersion baptisms. The big difference back then was how long you were held under water. Today, a person is simply dunked in a full immersion baptism. Back then, you were held under water until you began to struggle, until you knew you could die here - naked, cold, in front of all those people. And then, just when you thought you might drown, just when you became aware death was a full and complete reality for you just as it was for Christ, you were yanked back up out of the water. You would suck in air just like a baby breathing for the first time. Your sponsor would wrap you in a gleaming white robe and you would be presented to the congregation for the first time.

Imagine if there were 30 people waiting to be baptized. On Easter morning, the church could be baptizing people until 2 or 3 am. Then once everyone was baptized, the new Christians would participate in their first communion, together with everyone in the church. Torches were lit to mimic the light of the sun, so the church was extremely bright to celebrate the new birth of the new Christians in their midst. Often, the experience was so powerful for the baptized, they would change their names to reflect their new life in Christ. Because the power of the experience impacted them so deeply, it was as if the community was the voice of God telling the new Christian: "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased."

When I returned to the Christian faith after my time in the spiritual wilderness, I remembered the voice of Pastor Close as he said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... The Holy Spirit be upon you." In returning, I remembered my baptism and I had a moment - fleeting, suggestive and tentative - when it was as if I heard God saying what God said to Jesus: "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased." One of my pastor friends said, "If baptism is good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me."

I get lost in the minutiae of the faith often. I get unmoored pretty easily from the foundations of what it means to be a follower of Christ. But coming back to my baptism grounds me. It reminds me of the road I am walking upon, and that I do not walk this road alone.

When we seek the wisdom of God, as the wise men did in their journey to see the newborn Christ child, when we acknowledge the presence of the living Christ among us, as we do on Christmas Day, when we wonder how God is living out God's will and desire for us in our lives, where do we look? Well, according to the early Christians, Martin Luther, John Calvin and my personal experience, we can look to our baptism, whether it was as an infant or when you were able to remember the

experience. The voices which surrounded you on that very special day spoke the truth of *who you are* and *whose you are* - God's and God's alone. In this singular act, you are united to God and Christ through the gentle power of the Holy Spirit and become a child of God, a disciple of Christ and a member of the Church. Amen.