Sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord

January 9, 2022

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

 Now and again, someone asks me what my favorite parts of my work are. Near the top of the list is baptism.

 But I can narrow it down even more, to my favorite *part* of our Baptism ritual: The part near the end when I take some oil or balm and mark a cross on the forehead of the person being baptized, and declare to them and all the world that this person has been called a “child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

 I can’t possibly not feel humble in that moment, amazed that I get to be the person who declares to all those present that God has claimed this person as God’s own beloved child.

 These are the same words said to me by Pastor Simmons when I was baptized. And the same words which were said to him at his baptism, by someone who had the words spoken to him. And so on, and so on, all the way back to the disciples who went out into the world to be obedient to Jesus’ command to share what they’d experienced, and baptize people of all nations in the name of the Triune God.

 Baptism makes us part of the body of Christ forever. Not just those who are living today, but all who have ever been baptized in the Christian faith. It unites us in ways that are hard to fathom. Yet each of us gets these promises made to us individually, out of God’s unconditional love for each of us.

 We hear the story of Jesus’ own baptism today.

Ritual cleansing was a common practice in Jesus’ world, and it was done so that people were prepared to go to worship. Most of the time, most people were ritually unclean, which had nothing to do with their moral character. But once they’d been immersed, they were ritually clean and ready to enter into the presence of God at the temple.

 I’ll admit to having had a vague understanding of why Jesus felt the need to be baptized, but the *benefit* of it is abundantly clear: He got to hear the best words of affirmation *ever*. “You are my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Who *wouldn’t* want to hear that in a booming voice from the heavens?

 One of the things I love about this moment is that Jesus hadn’t begun his ministry at this point. He was a 20-something carpenter from Nazareth. Who, when he went back home and started speaking at the synagogue, puzzled those who heard him. “Isn’t this Mary’s son? The carpenter?”

 Jesus’ work of announcing salvation and redemption to all people doesn’t start until *after* his baptism.

 *After* he engages in a ritual to prepare himself to be in God’s presence. *After* God declares God’s love and approval in the most dramatic of fashions.

 Which makes me wonder if Jesus went to be baptized because he needed to be prepared for the work he was called to. The work he was born for. And that preparation included the prayers he lifted up as the voice came booming out of the heavens and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove.

 Only once Jesus heard this does he go into the wilderness and withstand temptation, and then begin his work.

Sustained by God’s declaration of love, Jesus called his disciples and began to preach a message of grace and mercy and salvation.

 We don’t get the booming voice from the heavens during our baptisms, but I think that baptism, and that promise that we are God’s beloved child, sealed by the Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, is the preparation we get for our work, for our vocation.

 Each of us has a calling, which is to live righteously in the world, trusting in the promises God has made to each of us and all of creation.

 That calling, for many of us, is given before we can walk or talk or eat solid foods, when we are presented as infants or toddlers to be baptized.

 By naming and claiming us in our baptisms — no matter our age — God declares unconditional love for us, offers us unconditional grace. And sends us on our way, asking only that we learn to place our trust — our faith — in God’s promises of forgiveness and salvation.

 It’s such an overwhelming act of love that it’s no wonder Martin Luther said that remembering his own baptism each morning was enough to help him feel like he could face his day without fear. And he had a *lot* of people angry with him a *lot* of the time.

 We may not get the heavens torn apart and a booming voice, the kind of voice that breaks cedar trees or makes mountains move, when we’re baptized. But we *do* get a precious gift, more valuable than anything we can imagine. We each get the promise that we have been redeemed, called by name, and claimed by God. Not because of anything we’ve done, but simply because we *exist*.

 And that, too, is a gift of the Creator of everything that has or will exist. And so is the faith to trust in those promises.

 So if baptism prepares us for our work, what’s that work?

 In a few minutes, we’ll be reminded of the promises made during our baptisms, and we’ll reaffirm those promises, committing ourselves to living them daily.

 We promise to live among God’s faithful people. To hear the Word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper. To proclaim the good news of God in Christ Jesus through word and deed. To serve all people, following Jesus’ example. And to strive for justice and peace in all the world.

 And we ask God to help and guide us along the way.

 This is our holy work.

 But being a part of the Body of Christ means that it is work we are not called to do alone.

 It is work we are not punished for failing to do.

 It is work that does not ask us to try to be something other than who we are.

 It is work that simply invites us to share what we have been freely given: grace, forgiveness, mercy, acceptance, and love.

 May God give us the gift of faith in abundance and bless our work, that we may be signs of God’s love for the world.