

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Acts 8:14-17

“May the Lord give strength to the people,
and bless us with peace.” AMEN!

It is always startling for me to read a gospel
and find something new that surprises me.

I know, I shouldn't be surprised
to find new things because
I know this is a living text and
for careful readers,

there's always new discoveries
to be made and new learnings to experience.

And the one that hit me this week
in preparation for the sermon today
was to notice that when Jesus

was baptized, in Luke, it was after
John the baptizer was put into prison.

What?!?

It's true, those verses that are omitted
from the lectionary (18-20) tell us
that John the baptizer was shut up in prison,
and then Luke tells of the baptism of
Jesus in just two verses!

Now, there are all sorts of scholarly debates that try to explain why Luke wrote the gospel this way.

Maybe it was a simple error, meaning that Luke meant to imply that after Jesus was baptized then John was thrown in prison.

Others say that the community, to which Luke was writing, was having trouble separating John and Jesus teaching,

meaning that Luke wrote it this way to imply that it's Jesus who is elevated and John who steps aside, or steps out of the spotlight so Jesus is center.

This explanation is the most logical to me because what happens right after these verses read today, in Luke, is the listing of Jesus' ancestors.

The long list of names include the biggies: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all the way to Adam, son of God.

I think that Luke wanted his audience to be sure that it really doesn't matter if

John did the baptism or not.

In other words, what matters most is
that we focus on Jesus.

Another reason I believe that Luke wrote
his gospel this way on purpose was
to prove to us that it was God who did
the baptism of Jesus.

There may have been human hands
that participated in it but the main agent,
or main action, was/is God.

That's the same way it is for us, too.

The efficacy of the baptism is fully reliant on
God's action, not the pastor's.

I know!

It may sound strange to hear your pastor say that,
since half of my main job description is
to faithfully administer the sacraments.

That is, Baptism and Holy Communion, but in order
for me to faithfully administer them,
I must be honest and get out of the way,
so to speak.

The pastor must step aside so that
God's action is spotlighted because as some
of you have heard me say,

“God can baptize anyway that God wants to...
it could be rain... even amniotic fluid...
the “water” that encompasses a child
in their mother's womb.”

God wants to baptize then God will baptize.

This doesn't imply we don't need
the church community to faithfully
partner in baptism,

but it does mean we (the church) have
to get out of the way and
know it's God's work. (Pause)

So we take Luke's witness of Jesus' baptism
the way the author tells it and find that in
just two verses we can unpack a whole lot
of good things for us to know.

First, that the baptism of Jesus was done
with a community of others.

We don't know exactly how many were there,

but we follow the example by our desire
to baptize publicly.

Private baptisms are not forbidden but
public baptisms are encouraged.

Next to learn, is that Luke makes clear that
Jesus was praying.

Prayer and baptism (this may sound obvious)
go hand in hand, yet even

though it sounds obvious,
no other gospel makes note specifically
that Jesus was engaged in prayer
at his baptism.

As with all facets of living, prayer is essential.

And it was during that prayer that
the heavens were opened and
the “bodily form” of the Holy Spirit came
like a dove descending upon Jesus.

(Pause)

If you remember one thing from this sermon,
remember this... be mindful of the Holy Spirit.

As my Gospels professor in seminary taught us:

This same Spirit that blew over
the waters in Genesis at creation,

crept up to Mary's window and quietly lifted it
to climb into Mary's room, before
she was married to Joseph and...
well you know that story. :-)

This Spirit is active and unpredictable, and
while Jesus' baptism was different than
the baptisms we perform today,

there are powerful similarities that confirm
the presence and power of the Holy Spirit
both then and now.

For Jesus, from here on, everything He does
is deeply rooted in, and led by, God.

That should be the same for us, too.

After we are baptized, everything we do
should be rooted in, and led by, God. (Pause)

Occasionally, I'll have someone inquire with me
about a desire to be baptized again, because
they don't remember their baptism.

Most of us who were baptized as babies,

don't remember it.

Yet, we are taught that it's a one time practice
and one time is enough, whether or not
we know about it.

The rest of of our lives are
the responses to that event. (Pause)

The truth is there are two
kinds of baptisms in the Bible.

It was not only a Christian thing.

Baptism was a ritual of cleanliness in
the Old Testament long before we made it
one of our sacraments.

That baptism, from the OT, is the kind
with water and for the forgiveness of sins or
to initiate the beginning of something
new and blessed.

That was Jesus' baptism.

Initiating a new thing, in a ritual of washing,
to be prepared for God to act.

The other kind of baptism in the Bible is

the the one with the Holy Spirit and fire.

When we are baptized in the name of Jesus,
God, and Holy Spirit

we receive a fire that is not always felt,
at least not right away.

Water, Spirit, or God Wind, and fire will,
however, one day engulf us, but
not to destroy humanity, but push us
into places we would not expect to go

because that's where we experience God. (Pause)

Author William Carter tells this story to illustrate:

There was once a minister named Al
who was pursuing a doctoral degree in theology.
He worked long hours on his dissertation,
so many hours, in fact, that he'd often
have his children interrupt him during
his studies begging him to come play
with them.

“Sorry, kids, I'm studying to write
my dissertation on
the pneumatological reality.”

“What’s that?” They wondered.

“I’m writing about the experiences of the Holy Spirit.”

They looked at each other with blank faces.

“What’s that?” (Pause)

One day they went to church and Al was
with his family in the congregation
not expecting much from the service that day.

The pastor was soft spoken and rather meek.

He never said much clearly, but
most everyone like him.

That particular Sunday was different, Al recalled.

When it came time for the sermon
the pastor stood and preached a powerful
sermon on racial equality.

This was during the sixties, in the south,
in a white, middle and upper class congregation.

People sat transfixed as their pastor laid
his career on the line, perhaps even his life
was being laid on the line.

“The day is coming,” he said,
“when all God’s children, white and black
will join hands in worship and service.

And that day is upon us.”

The congregation left in shock.

People couldn’t understand how their mild,
barely housebroken pastor could suddenly
have been filled with such fire.

On the way home it occurred to Al
what had happened.

“Kids,” he said, “remember how I said
I’ve been writing about the Holy Spirit?”

One said, “Yeah, and you never told us
what the Holy Spirit is!”

Al said, “We got a good picture today, at church.”

They saw the power of God pushing people
to a day when every hand shall join in mission
and every person will regard one another
with equality.

A day when every voice will sing and
join together in the praising of the Lord.

It is no empty promise.

It's a power that is given to us right over there,
at the baptismal fonts splash in,
and it comes directly from God.

AMEN!