

Making Christians

Isaiah 43:1-7; Romans 12:1-2; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

First Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 13) 2019

Baptism of Our Lord

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When I was growing up my parents gave me an instruction so often that it became ingrained in my bones: “Remember who you are,” they would tell me before dropping me off at a friend’s house or especially, before I went out the door as a teenager. Remember who you are... with the implication, if you remember who you are, then you will know how to act.

My favorite scene from one of my favorite movies is from the 1987 romantic comedy *Moonstruck* starring Cher, who won an Academy Award for Best Actress and Olympia Dukakis, who won for Best Supporting Actress. Olympia Dukakis’s husband is having an affair and in her anger and hurt, Dukakis goes out on her own for dinner and meets a charming man about her age. After dinner they walk together and he invites her up to his apartment. She says, “No.” He asks incredulously, “Why?” And she says, “Because I know who I am.”

In our Gospel reading from Luke today, Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, and afterward, Luke tells us that Jesus is standing there, among the many other people who had been baptized. Jesus is praying – and right off we get a clue, an insight about Jesus that will be confirmed over and over in Luke, and an insight into the church affirmed over and over in the Book of Acts, of being open and listening to God in prayer. Jesus has spent the last thirty years of getting ready for this moment. He has gone to synagogue, he has been taught to pray, he has learned to pray, and he has practiced praying. Here, while the water of

the Jordan River is still dripping from his wet clothes and his wet hair, he prays. He does what has become his habit – the habit of being with God.

As I said, this shows up again and again in Luke and Acts. Jesus prays, the church prays and if we're going to make it, we had better learn to pray. Luke is also the author of Acts, which tells the story of what happens after Jesus ascends into heaven, leaving the disciples alone. In other words, this is about us, too because this is precisely where we live, in that time after Jesus has left the earth. Prayer shaped the life of those early believers. In the first chapter of Acts, the disciples, including many women, were together in Jerusalem and were "constantly devoting themselves to prayer." Shortly after that time of prayer, the Holy Spirit came upon them in a rush of mighty wind and something that looked like tongues of fire. Luke wants us to see the connections. Jesus prayed and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. The believers prayed and the Holy Spirit came upon them. If Jesus prayed and the early believers prayed, then perhaps we had better spend more time praying.

When I was a student-minister-intern in college, there was a gracious elderly Baptist woman who was a person of prayer. Once, at a Women's Missionary Union (WMU) meeting at church, she began the meeting by praying, "Satan, be gone from this place," and a breeze came through and slammed the door. Everyone knew it was the wind, but at the same time, since she was praying, we wondered if Satan decided to leave the room. The pastor of the church told me later that when she prayed, "You had better be prepared to duck, because when she prays, things start happening."

“Pray,” says Luke. Prayer is at the heart of knowing who you are and an essential in being shaped by God and empowered by God. That’s why Luke says so much about prayer-and why he says so much about the Holy Spirit.

And God responds to Jesus’ prayer. Heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. Then Jesus hears a voice from heaven saying, “You are my Beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased” (Luke 3:21-22).

Jesus hears who he is. He has not done anything. He has not taught anyone. He has not performed any miracles, healed or forgiven. Before anything else, from the get-go he knows he is beloved by God. Everything else he does, everything else he says comes from this word from God that he is the beloved child of God.

And though, as far as we know, no one else heard this voice from heaven, Luke is clear in that this was not some inner voice or intuition or feeling. It was a voice from beyond Jesus, outside of himself. It came from God. “You are my beloved Son. Now, go get’em.”

Many years ago, when I was a brand-new pastor and all of about 23 years of age, an old deacon would pray with me before the worship service every Sunday morning. When he finished praying, he’d say, “Amen.” And then he would look at me and say, “Now, go sic’em.” Well, Jesus hears God say to him, “You are my beloved Son, my child. Now, go sic’em.”

And sic’em he does, except Luke does another curious thing. The first verses of chapter 4, Luke says, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.” These verses are obviously the transition from what we’ve just read and heard from Jesus baptism. Jesus is about

go sic Satan in the wilderness temptations, except Luke gives us this interesting interlude of Jesus' family tree, his genealogy.

Both Matthew and Luke give us Jesus's family tree. Now there are some differences between the two but I simply want to point out Matthew gives his at the beginning of his Gospel in chapter 1. But Luke gives his to us here, after Jesus's baptism, and before he is tempted by the devil and before he begins his public ministry. Why?

I'm not sure why but I'll tell you what I think. Luke is reminding us who Jesus is. And in a way he is telling us that Jesus knew who he was. He heard this voice from heaven telling him who he was and at the same time, Jesus is also the heir of this family tree, this family story. He is part of something larger and longer than himself – the story of God's people and God's redemption going all the way back to Adam. Notice that Luke goes back to Adam. This story is bigger than just the Jews; this is about all people. This story is big and Jesus is part of it.

Immersed in water, immersed in prayer and immersed in a story and family bigger than himself, Jesus knows who he is when he goes into the wilderness to face the Evil One, the Power of Death.

And he had better know who he is because Evil comes at him with everything in its power. It's battle to the death and it goes on for three years, until Jesus is killed on the cross.

Early church father Tertullian said, "Christians are made, not born." In other words, we do not become Christian by good intentions or just because we feel inspired. This is not about whether or not you're going to get into heaven. This is

about being shaped into the image of the living Christ. This is about offering our bodies to God as living sacrifices.

One of my favorite stories is the Will Willimon story of when he was a college student preparing to participate in a Civil Rights march back in the 60's. They were young and eager and impatient and they wanted to get out there and march but they were in a black church singing spirituals and freedom songs, listening to preaching and lots of praying. It was hot, the church was crowded and everyone just kept praying and singing. Will said, one of the students spoke up and said they were ready to march. The old preacher said, "When you go out there it is going to take more than good intentions. We're going to sing some more."

Being a follower of Jesus Christ takes more than good intentions. Our job at Austin Heights is to sing and pray and preach, teach and train and pray and sing some more, to get you into spiritual shape. We want you to be clear about who you are as a beloved child of God because when we go out that door we're heading straight into face the Powers of Death and Domination and we had better know and better remember.

Currently, I'm reading two books side by side. Then I came across a brief article that helped me read the two books in light of one another. The first book, *Glimpsing Resurrection: Cancer, Trauma, and Ministry*, is by theologian Deanna Thompson, who teaches at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She has stage IV breast cancer and writes about it in the context of trauma studies. Now trauma is usually associated with a single event but with ongoing or reoccurring symptoms. Thompson seeks to show how long-term illnesses like cancer are traumatic. Cancer undoes our lives and all that we hold dear. Everything about us is changed. There is irresolution; it goes on and the issue is how being Christian

might help us live without an answer, without resolution. It is a perpetual Holy Saturday, not the death of Good Friday but not yet the resurrection of Easter Sunday. Thompson says God with us in the never-ending “undone-ness” of life with cancer and remission and cancer and remission but how we are never the same.

The second book *The World Made Otherwise: Sustaining Humanity in a Threatened World*, by British Anglican theologian Timothy Gorringer, is about how the modern world’s commitment to free-market capitalism with its exploitation of the natural world, extraction of fossil fuels, and so on is resulting in climate change with likely civilizational collapse, and the breakdown of democracy. Gorringer writes about the call of the church in such a predicament.

In the meantime, I came across a brief book review by Philip Christman, a young English prof at the University of Michigan, who puts together cancer trauma and our planetary body, the Earth. He suggests that climate change can be viewed as a kind of trauma that changes everything about the planetary body from melting ice caps down to plankton cells, flooding coastlines, refugees, increased wars and violence, famine, extreme storms where there is flooding in some places and droughts in others. Meanwhile, political and corporate leadership seem to want the world to be four degrees hotter by the end of the century and right-wing movements in all of the richest countries seem determined to make sure the refugees we’re creating will have nowhere to go but into the sea. Christman says, “If we survive this disease, it will be a version of ourselves unrecognizable to ourselves.” Our body will never be the same – whether suffering from cancer or suffering from climate change (see *Christian Century*, Dec. 19, 2018, p. 39).

So you see when I say that we’re going out this door into the face of the Powers of Death and Domination, we had better know who God is, and who we

are. To deal with the traumas of cancer and climate change, refugees, racism, bigotry, and hatred and fear, we had better be rooted and grounded deeply in the living Christ. And we have to be rooted and grounded together. There are no lone ranger Christians. God calls us and baptizes us into community, the body of Christ, where we learn together, are formed together, where we remember that we are part of a story larger and longer than we are, where we sing together, pray for each other, and support one another.

I am well aware that as a congregation we need to talk through and do some teaching about Baptism and Holy Communion – which by the way, always go together. Some of us grew up Baptist and do not participate in the sacred meal at the Lord's Table without being baptized first. Others of us grew up Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Disciples, or Catholic and also do not participate in Holy Communion without baptism first, but were baptized as infants. And then there are of us who come from no real church background and are not sure what we're supposed to do.

What I'd like is for us to have some church classes, forums, probably on Sunday nights on all this. It's too early to say when, but as soon as we can. But to do this, we need you to show up. And no matter what, we need you to show up for Sunday morning Bible Study and/or Monday night Young Adult Bible Study or Wednesday night women's Bible Study. Showing up together is essential. Building, growing into, and nurturing Christ-like community is essential. This is not about *information*. It is about *formation*. It is being formed into the likeness of the living Christ. It is about knowing who God is and knowing who we are to where it gets down into our bones.

Our calling is to be a light in this darkening world. And the needs of this sick world are too great, the suffering and pain too extensive, the Powers of Death and Domination too potent, for us to be that light unless we are trained, formed, and rooted together. Unless we are made Christian down deep.

In Alex Haley's great book *Roots*, there is a memorable scene where the slave, Kunta Kinte, drove his master to a ball at a big plantation house. From inside the big house Kunta Kinte could hear the music from the white folk's dance, and he settled down in the buggy to wait the long night out. But after awhile he could hear other music, music coming from the slaves' quarters down below the big house. It was different music, music with a different rhythm. He went down to those cabins and found a man playing African music, *his* music which he remembered hearing in Africa as a child – music he had almost forgotten. He and the man talked and he discovered that the man was from the same part of Africa as he was and soon he was remembering his native language and spoke of home and the things of home.

That night, after returning from the dance, Kunta Kinte went home changed. He lay upon the dirt floor of his little cabin and wept, weeping in sadness that he had almost forgotten, weeping in joy that he had at last remembered. The terrifying, dehumanizing experience of slavery had almost obliterated his memory of who he was. But the music helped him remember.

The Psalmist asks, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137:4). Well, we had better learn. And it begins with baptism.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.