St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Psalm 29

Acts: 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Divine Affirmation

This is a strange time of year for the faithful. Our journey from Christmas into Epiphany is something like racing from zero to sixty in 12 days. It seems just yesterday that we decorated the church, and here we are at the first Sunday after the Epiphany, long after the wise men from the East, left for home by another road after visiting Jesus, who was, what seems like, moments ago a tiny infant lying in a manger, yet who is now around thirty years old, walking into the River Jordan to be baptized by his cousin John. John, the one who leapt with joy in Elizabeth’s womb when she received Mary, has grown into the kind of prophetic preacher Elizabeth and Jeremiah could never have imagined. One wonders of the conversations between the two at this stage of their sons’ lives.

They say children grow up fast, but never like either of these! We can thank the Apostles, Matthew, Mark and Luke for their need to cut to the chase and with the exception reporting a couple of childhood incidents, move straight from the crib to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry on earth.

So, here we are still basking in the aura of the birth of Christ, the shepherds, the angels, and are still wanting more of the wise men and their gifts, and let’s be truthful, we are all still wanting just a little more Christmas before the Herod’s of our world start trying to take over our lives again. Maybe that is one of the reasons we decided to leave up the decorations in the church until today!

It might help us to try not to think too chronologically. It makes liturgical sense in our minds for the season of Epiphany, the season of Light, to begin with the baptism of Jesus, the One come to enlighten the world. There are slight, but important differences between the Gospel writers of the sequence of events unfolding from the birth of Jesus and his life beyond. The particular emphasis and way in which each tells the stories from the nativity story to the baptism of Jesus offers us varying perspectives, depth and breadth to all that happened so long ago.

This year, we are journeying through these stories with Luke and there are several emphases which he brings to our attention, as he unfolds his version of what happened at Jesus’ baptism.

People are flocking to hear John the Baptist preach and listening to his call for repentance and invitation to baptism. Many are being baptized and wonder if John could be the long-awaited for Messiah. The people were “filled with expectation” and “questioning” in their hearts and minds about this. They were probably wondering if this man, John, would be the one they had been longing for. The one they had been hoping, for a long time, would come to lead them out of all the difficulties and challenges in their lives.

It’s a theme not unfamiliar to us. We long for the coming of the One who will lead us out of all the difficulties and challenges of our own world in our own time. It is not a new phenomenon. In all of human history and experience, it has been the same. Expectations and hopes that the right leader will materialize fills every human heart, no matter where they are in the world, who they are, or what their circumstances. All are filled with hope that they will be able to discern just who it is the world can trust enough to follow. Luke seems to understand this deep-felt and very real expectation and hope in the hearts of humankind in his own age and in ours.

Luke doesn’t’ describe much about the actual baptism of Jesus, but rather what happened *after* all the people, including Jesus, had been baptized and as Jesus was praying. He says it was while Jesus “was praying” when “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him.”

Jesus came to God in prayer. He was baptized and he prayed. He did not expect to undertake his ministry, his role on earth to be dependent only on his own human abilities or within his own power. He came to God, the source of his strength, knowing that source of strength was far beyond himself. So it is for us. We can learn from this simple action by Jesus at his baptism.

According to Luke, it was not at the moment of his baptism, but when Jesus was praying, that the Holy Spirit came to Jesus, and it was the Holy Spirit that gave him the courage to keep moving forward in his ministry throughout all the challenges and horrific events he had to face. Therein was a message for his disciples who would learn the value of prayer, even as they had to learn to carry on with their own ministries with patience and love, without Jesus.

That same message is for us. We were “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever” at our baptism. The journey of faith and obedience to God which we begin at our baptism, continues and is lived out through the practice of prayer, and it is through prayer that we receive the Holy Spirit.

As Church, we are to support each other in love, guided by the Holy Spirit, and we are to prayerfully depend upon the Holy Spirit to guide us out into the world to make a difference in the lives of those in need of hope, and secure love. No matter how much we are beset by a pandemic, war, climatic crises, and all the problems that face people at all levels of our society, we are called to be a lifeline inside it all, and we must never forget how to turn to God for the strength to carry out that call.

When the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, like the description in Mark’s telling of the story, it descended “like a dove.” Yet Luke’s version has a very distinctive difference from that of Mark. In the description we heard today, the Holy Spirit “descended upon him *in bodily form* like a dove….” In other words, what happened was real. It was a spiritual experience made tangible, and yet at the same time, ethereal, unworldly, indefinable “like a dove.”

For each of us, as a result of deeply profound prayer, there is a moment when heaven opens up, and something very real descends into our earthly experience. It is a kind of inbreaking, if you will. A new beginning. A new age.

It began when the Spirit descended upon Jesus, and it continues today. It happens each time our prayers rise up in Eucharistic prayer, invoking the Holy Spirit: “And so, Father, we who have been redeemed by him, and made a new people by water the Spirit, now bring before you these gifts. Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit….”

It is our moment of Epiphany, which is open to us over and over again, not just once at our baptism. It is a profound opportunity for us to pray deeply and with intention about our own journey of faith and our own call to ministry, as it was for Jesus, as the Spirit descended upon him.

Then “a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The voice from heaven was directed straight to Jesus, so that he would understand completely his identity as God’s Son and how he would live out his ministry with that identity.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul said, “Now, if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We share in the glory of God’s message to Jesus at his baptism, “You are my Beloved.” When we hear these words from a parent or someone significant to us in our lives, we absorb them, are strengthened by them, find our identity and our ability to move forward into fulfilling life, acting from that secure identity. If we don’t experience this kind of affirmation, we can become unsure of who we are, struggling with trust and self-confidence.

Yet, we are all affirmed by the good news that in Christ, we are Beloved. We are all strengthened by the power of that identity, all moved to trust, to find purpose and deep love for God’s world and all that is created in it. It moves us with powerful conviction into the renewal of our Baptismal Vows, which we will repeat in just a few moments.

According to Luke, Jesus was baptized with “all the people.” He presented himself as one of us, as one of the world of sinners. He just got in line with the rest of us, all who were facing the same kind of tearing apart by the world and had just about given up on finding any hope in the future, for the world or for themselves. But there they were, lined up after listening to John, hoping that by returning to God, they would find renewed hope. And there was Jesus, right with them, identifying with all the broken and damaged people who needed God; identifying with all of us who are lined up for the same reason.

The Good News is that through the baptism of Christ, and through the presence of the Holy Spirit, each one of us is Beloved, in whom God is well pleased. No matter our mistakes, our hesitations, our challenges and suffering, our triumphs or our degree of faith, our insecurities or wherever we are in life’s circumstances, we are, every one of us, beloved by God. We are created by God, each a child of God, each pleasing to God. The only way we cannot be pleasing to God is to ignore God’s commandments to love one another and to love our neighbor. They are the two commandments that Jesus took to the cross. The two commandments he left with us, sending his Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to assist us in adhering to them with all our heart, mind and strength.

It is the Holy Spirit that will give you the will to get through these dark days of confusion and chaos in the world. It is the Holy Spirit who will give you the strength to follow your path, regardless of the obstacles the world insists on placing in your way, it is the Holy Spirit who sealed you and marked you as Christ’s own for ever and it is God, the Father of Jesus and of us all who calls you “ my Beloved.”

We are in great need to hear this divine affirmation from God and we need to hear it from each other. No more tearing down, no more watching from the sidelines, for “You are my child, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.” They are the words that changed Jesus’ life forever; they are the words that, when you choose to hear them, will change your life and the lives of all those whom you bless by this same divine affirmation, “You are God’s Beloved child.” Alleluia!

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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1. Romans 8:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)