

Sermon – Luke 3: 15-22
The Baptism of Our Lord

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, after three weeks of the stories of Jesus' birth and childhood, which we capped off last week with Epiphany and the visit of the magi, we find ourselves teleported 30 years hence to the beginning of Jesus' ministry and specifically to his baptism. Like our New Year, here today in January 2022, Jesus' baptism marks a new beginning. It became the prelude to a three year ministry that changed the world. And interestingly in Luke's Gospel, the text today is as much about John the Baptist as it is about Jesus. It led me to think about the many roles that we can all play in preparing people to meet Jesus. So today I thought we could unpack Luke's scripture in light of our own New Year and the roles that we can take on in preparing the way for people in our community to meet Jesus. Perhaps it's a good time to ask ourselves, how can we invite our community into our church network of groups and activities. You see, just as people were filled with expectation and questions 2000 years ago, about John the Baptist and his ministry, I believe people today are still filled with questions about the issues that John was raising, the deeper issues about the meaning of life, salvation and what it is to be human on this planet in the 3rd millennium. Let's take a look at this Gospel text and see how our world intersects with the world at Jesus' baptism.

The scene of our verses today is set earlier in chapter 3 with John the Baptist proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins around the region of the Jordan River. And the eight verses that we have today, can be divided into 4 segments, the first being about the people who were filled with expectation and questions and who were baptized with water by John the Baptist. It's interesting to note that we start this reading with people. People who are curious, who are interested, who have expectations and questions. How many people do we know like this, in our families, among our friends and in our social networks? And how often do we embark on a journey with these friends or family or acquaintances, to explore the meaning of life, and death, to explore the significance of key moments and what kept people going, to explore the concepts of

forgiveness, salvation and a better life, both here and now, and in the future? How often are we invited into someone else's life and wonderings about these important and deep issues? Perhaps it happens over a cuppa, or a beer, or a shared meal. Perhaps the moment happens unexpectedly, or perhaps it arises out of a crisis or other significant event, into which we are privileged to be drawn.

I call these moments divine appointments. God opens the door for us to share our love, our love for God and our love for the person in whose presence we find ourselves.

And so what do we do or say in this moment that God has provided? I think we model ourselves on Jesus. We listen. We show respect and love them. And if we get the opportunity, we share, authentically, our own story: how our story of faith intersects with the circumstances that are in front of us.

In our Gospel reading today, John says to the people "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming." John's role was to prepare the way for Jesus. And I think that this is our role today. We are sent out into the world to meet people and prepare the way for Jesus. And we do this by coming along side of people, loving them, sharing our story with them and inviting them to be part of our collective story.

You see, people who are unchurched, as many people today are, actually don't know the saving grace of Jesus, or indeed the stories about Jesus that we take for granted. So this means that you will need to get your head around your own story. Your story about how Jesus makes a difference in your life. It's not something that we perhaps naturally have in our kit bag of stories, but it is something worth developing. Telling your story with authenticity and passion can be really empowering. It was something that I was asked over and over again in my journey to ordination. And our stories are as diverse as we are. There is no better or right or wrong story. Some of you may have had the dramatic Paul like epiphany. Others like myself may have felt a gradual drawing into belief and love of Jesus. Last year, I hoped to visit you all to hear your stories, to hear how Jesus makes a difference in your life. This year, we'll try again to connect at that deeper level, so please start preparing your story to share with at least me!

The next segment of our Gospel reading in verse 21 is Jesus being baptized by John. There is nothing normal about this baptism. It launches Jesus on his mission. It defines him as Son of God, as the Spirit filled Servant described in terms of Old Testament expectation whose mission is to bring justice to his people. It is the beginning of a renewal so profound as to amount to a new creation. Jesus' ministry will reclaim lives for a new humanity to be lived out as a renewed people of God. With Jesus comes a new covenant for all people regardless of race, religion, sex or status. The baptism of Jesus marks a pivotal point in the history of humanity.

But what does baptism mean to us? In time to come, I hope to baptize Teddy, Sean and Steph's new baby at one of our Sunday services. As part of the opening prayer I will say:

Baptism is the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. It marks the beginning of a journey with God which continues for the rest of our lives.

Baptism is a sacrament recognized by all Christian denominations: an outward expression of an inward grace. During baptism, we, or our Godparents and parents on our behalf, make promises to turn to Christ and reject selfish living. By passing through the waters of baptism, where we die to sin and are raised to new life, we are united to Christ's own dying and rising.

Baptism is about being in a profound relationship with God, and with God's creation, including each other. Leading someone to Christ, showing someone the love of God in our own lives and the difference that it makes, is a pathway towards inviting them to consider Christ. And as a church community, we also need to provide opportunities for early faith education, be these structured programs like Alpha or a network of home groups where people meet to pray and study scripture and, to which people with an early faith can be invited, and their faith nurtured and developed. As we move forward in discerning our future and our vision, we need to consider how we as a parish welcome and nurture seekers and new believers into our midst.

The third segment of our reading today is also found in verse 21. Jesus prayed. Jesus praying at his baptism is unique to Luke's Gospel and I think it underlies the importance

of prayer in the gospel writer's mind. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus prays regularly, taking himself away from the crowds to spend time with God his father. And prayer is important to Jesus, not just through his actions, but also his words. In chapter 11 of Luke's Gospel, he teaches his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer and in chapter 18, he tells them a parable of the 'need to pray always and not to lose heart'. And you might have noticed that in our reading from Acts today, Peter and John went to Samaria and prayed with the new disciples there to receive the Holy Spirit. And when they laid hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit. In the words of Howard Thurman, a prominent black theologian and human rights activist of the mid 20th century, "Through prayer, meditation, and singleness of mind, the individual's life may be invaded by strength, insight, and courage sufficient for their needs." I love the idea of our lives being invaded by courage sufficient for our needs through prayer, that prayer delivers. As Jesus says, also in chapter 11 after he teaches the Lord's Prayer, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

I wonder what would happen if we all prayed for those divine appointments, for those moments when we have the opportunity to share our faith and invite our friends and family to join us in loving Jesus and loving each other? I wonder what would happen if we all prayed for Christian renewal here in Lara and Little River. It's something that is on my mind at the moment and something that I will be talking more about and encouraging as we move forward in our journey together.

And our 4th segment of the Gospel reading today comes as both a visual and auditory revelation from God. It's common to all 4 Gospels. Verse 22 says "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This revelation articulates the significance of family as one of the dominant metaphors in the gospel's teachings. Just as Mary and Elizabeth are kin, so too are their children, Jesus and John. And here a voice from heaven claims both kinship and approval of Jesus. And this foreshadows Jesus' mission to draw humanity into kinship with God. As he is in kinship with our great creator God, so too can we be beloved, and part of the family of God. And the Holy Spirit

falls upon Jesus like a dove. The human experience of the Holy Spirit is described and repeated most famously at Pentecost but also in Samaria as per our reading from Acts today. To experience the Spirit is to know that we are at home in the family of God. Have you been moved by the Holy Spirit at some time in your life? Is this part of your story? Is family a good metaphor for you to use in developing your story?

Today's Gospel is well known and no doubt you have heard it preached on many times. It makes us question how do we become closer to God, how can we be beloved? And I would say through prayer and through understanding our own journey and our own story of how Jesus has made a difference in our own life. And in understanding our own story, we can tell our friends and our family, and draw them into kinship with God, our mighty creator and saviour.

Let us pray.

Glorious and loving God,

We give you thanks for this created world, its beauty, its resources, and the people who live within it. We give you thanks that you sent Jesus Christ to live among us and show us how to be in right relationship with you. And we pray that as we make our journey through 2022, we come to understand and know our own personal stories of your love for us, that we can share these stories with the people around us and invite them to be part of your great story. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.