

Baptism of our Lord January 9 2022

Gospel: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

John is proclaiming in the wilderness, along the River Jordan. The gateway of the ancestors of the Israelites into the promised land. How powerful his words must have been because he draws large crowds into that place. For many of them, a journey of more than a day, one way. It is a diverse group, tax collectors, Roman soldiers, and Jews of every social class.

Why did they come? It wasn't for the self-affirming presentation many popular speakers give today. We have the testimony in the early part of chapter three where John calls those gathered around him a "brood of vipers"! Not exactly an "I'm okay, you're okay" kind of speaker. So, what drew them? What was worth the sacrifice of time and energy to get there? What was worth the...you could almost call it verbal abuse?

There was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Obviously, they acknowledged that there were sins that needed forgiving. They craved the release from those misdeeds and mistakes against God and humans. There was clear direction about how they were to live their lives in accordance with God's commands. Direction that would help avoid the sinning. But there was more.

As our text starts this morning, the people are filled with expectation- an anticipation and hope- they are expecting- what? The Messiah, wondering if John might be the one. He certainly talks the talk they were expecting- with his condemnations of powerful and peasant alike. With his bold talk even to Roman soldiers. Brusque and in your face, John checks the box of the Jewish imagination

of the descendant of David who was the Messiah who would finally make Israel great again. Who would be the great warrior, priest, and ruler that would lead a revolt and kick the hated Roman occupiers out, would restore the worship of the One True God in all its fullness and would lead Israel to once again be a shining city on the hill that would be a light to all nations of God's righteousness and power.

This is what they expected, what they anticipated. This is part of what drew them from their homes and businesses, from their daily lives into the desert, on the edge of the wilderness a place of wandering, of challenge and threat. To see John, who just might be the one they expected.

But John shunts aside their expectations. There is another, who is more powerful than I, he says. Holy cow! Can you imagine John to the nth degree? One who John isn't even fit to perform the most menial task for- the untying of the sandals on his feet. One who will baptize them with wind and fire! Oh, this is the one they expect. Look out Roman Empire and the rest of the world! Here we come!

And yet, they miss him, miss it. We almost miss it. The baptism of Jesus gets lost amongst the crowd. "When all the people were baptized, and Jesus was baptized too and was praying". And Luke agrees with Mark that the voice and appearance of the Holy Spirit were to Jesus alone. The people were expecting the wrong thing, looking for the wrong thing, so much so they missed the Jesus in their midst. Praying amongst them. A decidedly, un-John like figure.

My colleague, Pastor Travis Borkosky wondered about that word, expectation. And it got me wondering, too.

What is it that we expect? What are we anticipating? From our own baptism?
From our faith? From our God?

Are we expecting and anticipating what we want? Or what God gives, what God knows we need? How do we know the difference?

Christian theologian Augustine has a pretty good rule of thumb for how to interpret scripture, if it doesn't lead to love of God and love of neighbor, you're probably doing it wrong. This, of course, echoes Jesus' own teaching on what the greatest commandment is (love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself).

How did that rule of thumb match what the people gathered at the Jordan were expecting? The kind of Messiah they sought. Did that Messiah lead to love of God and love of neighbor?

What do you expect of your baptism?

Raise your hand if you were baptized as an infant. Yep, that's the primary way it happens. Anyone baptized as an adult. And if there is anyone who wants to be baptized come see me.

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we baptized infants for a variety of reasons; it's historical, it's biblical, and it best illustrates our understanding that baptism isn't about what we do, but what God does and has done. Baptism gives us an unshakeable ground for living and acting because it is independent from our own activity and rests solely on God's action.

Martin Luther, after reading scripture- especially the Apostle Paul, points to baptism as a death and resurrection. In it, the old sinful nature we have is drowned, and a new creation comes up out of the waters. We are indeed made new through water and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism also gives us our identity, Child of God, called into the relationship within the Body of Christ that is the church. Citizen first and foremost of the reign of God. God lays claim to the entirety of who we are in baptism- heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Is this what you expected? What you anticipated?

I wonder.

I wonder when I see parents bring a child to baptism, stand and make their promises to raise their children in the faith, to put in their hands the scriptures and teach them the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments. To live with them in a community of faith. And then I don't see them again. I wonder what they think happened there. What they expected.

Perhaps their expectation is that baptism is a bit like getting your hand stamped in indelible ink when you leave the park, it gives you free access anytime. That it's some kind of cosmic fire insurance. No going to hell here.

What do you expect of your faith? Of baptism? Is it what you want or what God gives?

I wonder, when I see those who have affirmed their baptism, who promise to strive daily to live among God's faithful people, to hear God's word and share in

the Lord's Supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ in word and deed, to strive for justice and peace, to serve others as Jesus served us and I see little evidence of that. Now, I'm not in every moment of their lives. And who am I to talk, who am guilty of the same things. But it makes me wonder, what do we expect of our faith? And is it what God gives. Or is it what we want. What is easy and convenient. That we've gotten our ticket punched and God's forgiving anyway and I've learned enough and so why waste the time. There are more important/fun/helpful things to do.

I think, like the people at the Jordan, that we don't see the Jesus in our midst. We're so busy looking for is what we think God wants, funnily enough it tends to match what we want. But it always produces, less than satisfying results.

What we know about the God we worship is that God has always pursued relationship with God's people. God does not want to be some clockmaker God who winds things up and lets them run on their own. God wants to be in relationship with us. God desires to be an intimate part of your life. God wants these things, because we have proven time and again that when left to our own devices we screw things up. Because God has so much God wants to give us- grace, mercy, peace and those come best through that established relationship and consistent dialogue.

It makes me sad, because I know the power that comes when you have this lifelong relationship with God. When you live, day in and day out steeped in scripture and prayer, with the God who sent his Son Jesus so that you might have life, fuller and more abundant. Who sent his Son into the world not to dominate

it, but to love each and every person in it back into relationship with God because they are all worth dying for. Who desires us to see each other in the same way.

I'm a lifelong Christian who happens to be Lutheran, who has spent his whole adult life in ministry and I still crave it. I envy those around me who- you just look at them and know they've got a connection so much deeper than you. And you see the reality of it in their lives. Sometimes they suffer the most horrible tragedies and trials and while it hurts and wounds them there is a peace, a stillness, a solidity that nothing can move. That is their connection, their ongoing relationship with God.

It's not about making God the only thing in your life. But it is about making God a vital part of your life. Just like building and maintaining a relationship with your best friend, or sibling, or parent it takes time, spent together, talking, listening, learning. And it is never too late. As Martin Luther reminds us "Christ does not fall from the chair of grace because of my misdeed. The ship is steady; if anyone should fall out, that one should swim and see to it that he or she gets back in! If you have not believed, then believe now!"

And this is the grace we find in baptism. What we can expect. An indelible sign of God's claim on us traced on our foreheads. The waters that are always available to us, to start anew, each day. To wash away the old and be made new. To have our eyes opened to the Jesus who is already beside us. Ready and eager to walk with us into our new life. A life that is so much more than we expected. Thanks be to God.