

BAPTISM OF JESUS

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened. Luke 3:21

I was driving home from my dentist in Belmont the other day and thinking about this sermon when I found myself behind a car with a big decal in the rear window. In funky letters about 4 inches high it said JESUS, and underneath in smaller text, *Eternal Protection*. Beneath that, in even smaller script, was the passage from John, *For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, that all who believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3.16.)

I thought this car might belong to the current rectors of my former parish, All Saints' Belmont, which is a very different place from the Low Church, Morning Prayer place I attended 25 years ago, with very different leadership and very different theology.

Then when I was almost home, on Greenough St, I saw another car, which announced, on its rear bumper, in even larger letters, JESUS IS COMING BE PREPARED.

These are the kinds of proclamations that, I suspect, lead many of you to tell me that you are uncomfortable with Jesus, or at least uncertain what to do with him. Indeed, these are the kinds of proclamations that often make us, and I include myself, a bit reluctant to call myself a Christian. Because the "Christianity" so proudly claimed by many in this country today, and the particular theology of Jesus implied by the vehicular announcements I saw, is not my Christianity. It's a Christianity focused on individual salvation and on *us versus them*, a narrow, exclusionary Christianity in my view.

I'm more apt, as you may have noticed, to refer to myself, and to us here at St. John's, as *followers of Jesus*. Because, to be clear, in Jesus' day there were no Christians. Only Jews, and then Gentiles, who followed Jesus and who eventually began to call themselves Christians. But Jesus of Nazareth would have had no idea what they were talking about.

I don't like it that the term Christian has been appropriated by people with whom I strenuously disagree. But that's a problem for another sermon.

In the meanwhile, to call ourselves *followers of Jesus* may eliminate the problematic aspects of being a "Christian" but it doesn't solve the problem of discomfort with Jesus. I don't share that discomfort now, though I used to. As I've said before, when I was in the ordination process I told my discernment committee that Jesus was not at the

center of my worship life, and while I get points for honesty there I don't get points for political savvy, and it's rather miraculous that I advanced in the process. Although, as I've implied, I'll bet Jesus wasn't at the center of the worship life of most of my Belmont interrogators, either. I think the 1928 Book of Common Prayer was the center of the worship life of most in that parish then.

In the intervening years, however, I've gotten very comfortable with Jesus – at least, if you can call it *comfortable* to be continually challenged, confronted, and called to account. In reading the Gospels over and over, in reading *about* Jesus, in writing sermons, in leading bible studies and discussion groups and trying to figure out how to talk about Jesus with all of you, Jesus has increasingly become alive to me, has become endlessly interesting and provocative, and has become someone I invite into my prayer life regularly.

I mean, I'm a concrete thinker! And Jesus was alive – he walked the earth, people could touch him and talk with him, and he undoubtedly said some of the remarkable things attributed to him. Jesus is much more graspable to me, in many ways, than God is – God the Creator, and certainly more comprehensible than that slippery character the Holy Spirit. So I *love* Jesus now, I do.

But what does all this have to do with our Gospel for today, the story of Jesus' baptism? Several years ago Gretchen preached a sermon about the Baptism of Jesus that people found very helpful. My memory of what she said is imperfect. But I believe she addressed the question of why Jesus had to be baptized at all. And why did he? If Jesus was indeed the Son of God – whatever that means– *and was without sin*, why would he need baptism? Why would he choose it? Did he need in fact to be cleansed from sin, purified, as the Jews believed? Did he need to be born again, as we now describe baptism? (Or, as another bumper sticker would have it, *Born Once, and that's enough*)

In Luke's Gospel, the account of Jesus' baptism is minimized. Jesus does not come alone, but along with everyone else for a big group baptism, and the event itself is set in a subordinate clause, along with prayer. *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened.* Luke certainly doesn't make a big deal of it, and that may have been owing to what I've already mentioned, some early Christian difficulty, some perplexity, if not embarrassment, at the notion that Jesus had to be baptized at all.

The Gospel of Matthew tries to address this problem. Here's his version

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John

tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. If you understand the meaning of “fulfill all righteousness,” which could mean, *let's cover all the bases*, maybe that's an explanation.

Later Christian writings turned the baptismal scene into a spectacle with bright lights, fire on the surface of the water, and a heavenly voice explaining the divinity of Christ. But Luke doesn't do that. He passes over the account rather quickly.

And I think the efforts to turn the baptism into an extravaganza highlighting the divinity of Christ, misses the point. Or at least, the point to me. Because I think Jesus got baptized not in order to be different from us, to be divine. I think Jesus of Nazareth got baptized for the opposite reason, to be human, to become, as we say in the Nicene Creed, *fully human*. Because what is it to be fully human but to do the things we humans do? To feel what we feel, to think as we think, to know hunger and thirst – both physical and spiritual– to experience pleasure and pain, risk and reward, success and failure? All those human things.

Whether accounts whip by Jesus' baptism, as Luke does, or amplify it, like Matthew, all agree about one thing: this was a turning point. Up until now Jesus has been living more or less privately, growing up, going to Temple, learning carpentry, what have you, and now, after the baptism, he's on a new course. God claims him as God's beloved, either privately, as Mark implies – Mark says that Jesus saw and heard the Holy Spirit as a dove, but it's not clear that anyone else does; or publicly, as in Matthew and Luke. Then Jesus goes into the desert for 40 days. Then he begins his public ministry. The baptism sets him off on a new course, his life's purpose and destiny.

We've all had such turning points in our own lives. Or perhaps I should say *turnings*, because for most of us, setting off on a new course does not happen as a single point, but as a process, a sequence of happenings and realizations, a series of choices, that takes in a different direction. For most of us, baptism does not, literally, set us off on a new course, because most of us are too young for that when we are baptized. We are too busy learning to hold our heads up and grow teeth to be worrying about our life's purpose and destiny.

And we may not, when we are in that process of turning, be particularly aware that we are in the midst of change. Perhaps only in retrospect do we understand the fatefulness of certain events and decisions that have altered our course. And even more rarely may we be aware, while that turning is occurring, how God may be in the midst of

it, or even that God is there at all. Not for most of us, most of the time, is that voice from heaven heard, claiming us clearly and definitively. (And for that matter, I have been known to say, when I know of someone's having heard that voice, I often wonder if it's God they hear calling, or McLean Hospital.)

But those of us here this morning, and all who believe, or who hope, that the God of Jesus of Nazareth cares about us, are asked to reflect on God's presence in our lives, are asked to contemplate how God was, or is, present, in our turnings, our changes, our life-altering times. We are asked to try to understand what God intended and intends for us, what God hopes for us, what God promises us.

We are asked to pray about these questions. Indeed, there's perhaps nothing more important *to pray about: how does God make God's presence known in our lives, to what does God invite us, where does God call us to go?* These are lifelong questions, worthy of deep, complex consideration.

But the Gospel narratives are not the place for deep, complex considerations. The Gospel narratives, John excepted, are what current literary theory would call *flash narratives*, quick, condensed, action-packed. *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened.*

And everything changes. Everything changes for Jesus. He gets baptized along with all the other humans. And he's claimed by God as God's own. Fully human. Fully human because he's claimed by God. It isn't one or the other. It isn't even both/and. He's fully human because he knows he's been claimed by God, he knows he's divine, and with that knowledge his life will never be the same.

And so it is with us, my dear friends. When we understand how God is, and has been, present in our turnings, how God has called us into new directions, when we recognize that God has claimed us as God claims Jesus of Nazareth, then our lives, too, will never be the same. Alleluia! Amen

