

Baptism of Our Lord (C)
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Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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When our kids were young, we'd spend part of every summer in Arkansas at my parents' house. It was a beautiful place on the White River, way out in the country, and a wonderful place for the kids to play outside. They could splash and throw rocks in the river. My parents had an old, friendly dog who would follow them everywhere. There were bikes to ride and balls to throw. Sometimes, though, it was just too hot and humid outside—it was Arkansas, after all—and we'd need some sort of indoor activity to keep the kids occupied. There was one summer when we all made friendship bracelets by braiding different colors of string together, which we all wore on our wrist or ankle. They were bright, pretty colors, like aqua and pink and yellow. We all wore our friendship bracelets everywhere we went—indoors, outdoors, swimming in the lake—until the colors faded into pastels. But they were still fun, and they were like a sign of belonging, that we belonged to each other.

I remembered those friendship bracelets this week as I was thinking about baptism and how the story of Jesus' baptism might speak to us. Baptism is about belonging—belonging to each other as the community of Jesus, belonging to our Creator as children of God forever, and belonging to God's ongoing work to heal the human family. I wonder whether our gospel story this morning can help us appreciate this amazing gift of belonging that God gives to us in our own baptisms.

Luke begins by telling about the ministry of John the Baptist, but then hardly mentions Jesus being baptized at all. He's more interested in what happened afterward when Jesus was praying, heaven was opened to him. Religious artists sometimes attempt to picture it as like a sunburst shining down on Jesus—but who knows, really, what it looked like. Perhaps, though, we can imagine what it felt like for Jesus when heaven was opened to him. It was a moment of absolute clarity, of God making known to him who he was and what his life was all about. Wouldn't that be amazing! I wonder if you've ever experienced anything at all like that—a moment of real clarity about your life. Sometimes that can be challenging, maybe even painful. A moment of clarity might motivate us to choose different priorities, even make significant changes in our lives. I wonder how your baptism speaks to you about your sense of purpose in life and how you think of your future. I wonder how belonging to God and belonging to each other as the community of Jesus shape what you value and the choices you make and how you live.

Luke says that in this moment of clarity for Jesus, when heaven was opened to him, the Holy Spirit descended on him. This is about being empowered and equipped for the task ahead. Jesus wasn't going to begin his work of teaching and healing and forgiving on his own. He wasn't going to take on the powerful people and institutions that exploited the poor and fostered division on his own. He wasn't going to show the world what the reign of God looks like on his own. Instead, he would find strength and wisdom from the presence of God among God's people—the Holy Spirit. In fact, as we read through the Gospel of Luke together this year, we'll see again and again how Luke pictures the whole of Jesus' work as motivated and directed by the Spirit of God. I wonder when you have known yourself to be empowered and equipped by God to meet the challenges that come to you. I wonder when you've been aware that it wasn't just your own strength and wisdom that saw you through a difficult time, but instead you found encouragement or perspective by being part of this community where God's Spirit is at work. Sometimes it is through the love of God's people that we feel God's love for us, or through the faithful example of God's people that we experience God's inspiration or guidance for us. I wonder if you've ever thought of your baptism and belonging to God's people as a means of grace by which God is present and active in your life. I wonder how you experience the Spirit working through this community to empower and equip you for your daily life.

Finally, then, Luke tells how Jesus heard a voice from heaven, the voice of God, saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." What's really interesting about this heavenly voice is how it addresses Jesus with the language of scripture, picking up two especially powerful themes. First, God says, "You are my Son," which is a quote from Psalm 2, originally spoken to the kings of Israel at their enthronement. In Jesus' time, these words were understood as addressed to the Messiah, the One anointed by God to save and restore God's people. It was as if God said to Jesus, "You are my chosen one, the Messiah. Your job is to bring deliverance to my people." But then God says, "With you I am well pleased," and this is a quote from Isaiah 42, from one of the Servant Songs. The Servant Songs come from the period of the exile in Babylon, and speak of the Servant of the Lord who will do God's work to open the eyes of the blind and set the captives free. But the Servant will also face opposition, will be despised and rejected, but by his innocent suffering and death God will bring healing to God's people. It's as if God said to Jesus, "Your work to bring healing and liberation will take you on a path of suffering. But I will vindicate you." Using the words of scripture, the heavenly voice gives Jesus his job description, his marching orders. And I wonder when, through the words of scripture, you've felt God speak to you about your calling in life. Maybe it's something simple, like "love your neighbor as yourself," or "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Or maybe it's something challenging like "Love your enemies and forgive those who sin against you." Maybe through the

stories about Jesus acting with compassion and forgiveness and humility, you felt God calling you to “go and do likewise.” I wonder if you’ve seen your baptism as a sign that you have been made part of Jesus’ ongoing work of love, and your life now belongs to compassion and forgiveness and healing.

It really is amazing how much happened for Jesus as he was praying after being baptized. He experienced clarity about his life, he was empowered by God’s Spirit, and his vocation, his path forward in life, was revealed to him. We can also look to our own baptisms for a sense of clarity and empowerment and vocation, whether we can remember when we were baptized or not. In our baptisms, the Church speaks for God to address us and name us as God’s beloved children, forgiven and precious in God’s sight. In our baptisms, the Church speaks God’s promise to us, that in the community of God’s people we will experience God’s Spirit at work to give us comfort and strength and wisdom. And in our baptisms, the Church speaks God’s call to us, summoning us to follow Jesus’ way of compassion and forgiveness.

Martin Luther encouraged a simple spiritual practice for us, making the sign of the cross each day as a way of remembering our baptisms, remember when the water was poured over us and the sign of Christ’s cross was marked over us. Then we were named God’s beloved children. And we received the promise of God’s Spirit, and we were called into Jesus’ way of love. When we remember our baptisms, there is clarity and empowerment and direction for every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.