

Sermon, January 14, 2024

Matthew 3:13-17

“The Baptism of Jesus”

John the Baptist was standing knee deep in the Jordan River, and the shore was crowded with people waiting to wade into the river, one by one, to receive baptism. Suddenly, John finds himself standing face to face with a man whose presence perplexes him. He says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” His question makes sense. Earlier he had been confronted by Sadducees and Pharisees who had come for baptism and had accused them of being a “brood of vipers”. He then proclaimed, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”.

He now realizes that the man standing before him is the one of whom he spoke, and he is perplexed because, as he had said, his was a baptism for the repentance of sin, and he recognized that the man standing in front of him was without sin. The man, of course, was called Jesus, and his reply to John was one that has left biblical scholars and theologians scratching their heads for centuries. He said, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”. What did he mean by fulfilling all righteousness? Was he talking about fulfilling the law, or perhaps, fulfilling prophecy? It has been suggested that he was saying it as a way of expressing his solidarity with the others standing on the shore - those who fall short of the glory of God, just as we do. We may never know!

And, so, John baptized Jesus, and as Jesus rose up out of the water, he saw heaven open up and the Spirit of God coming down in the likeness of a dove, alighting on him, and heard a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”.

First, consider the image of the dove. If you think back to Genesis, and the story of Noah, it was a dove sent out by Noah that came back with an olive leaf in its beak, indicating that the flood waters had begun to subside. And so the image of a dove returning to Noah, and a dove alighting on Jesus, symbolizes a new beginning for the world and humankind.

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus then tells his disciples to go, “and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”.

Down through the history of the Church baptism has taken on various meanings. It is seen as a form of participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is particularly evident in those traditions that involve full immersion at baptism. Submersion into the water identifies with the death of Jesus. Rising up out of the water is symbolic of the resurrection and the realization of New Life. The use of water also symbolizes cleansing, i.e., the washing away of the power of sin, which also requires confession of sin and a conversion of one's heart.

As the Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism, so, also, do we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, which helps nurture our faith, and empowers us for ministry.

Baptism also incorporates us into the Body of Christ, which not only draws us into union with Christ, but also with one another, and with the Church universal spread throughout the world. This is all well and good, and we should rejoice and express gratitude for God's mercy and forgiveness, and for the gift of faith that sustains us in good times and bad. But, unfortunately, for far too many Christians that is where it ends. The second part of the Great Commission is largely overlooked- the part that says that we are to obey everything that he commanded.

After Jesus was baptized, he didn't think to himself - great, God has called me his beloved Son, and that he is well pleased with me - so now I think I will return to Nazareth and resume my carpentry business. No! The alighting of the Spirit of God was empowerment- empowerment to go out into the world bringing something new, to heal the sick in body, mind, and spirit, to proclaim good news to the poor and the oppressed, to lift up the poor in spirit, as well as those who mourn, to encourage those who cry out for justice, and declare peacemakers' children of God. He shocked the world by placing love at the heart of all things, even demanding that we not only love our neighbors as ourselves, but our enemies as well.

We gather here each Sunday to worship our Lord, to confess our sinfulness and express our gratitude for divine mercy and compassion, and to seek a strengthening of our faith, but all of what we do in here is meant to empower us for what we do out there!

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Life's most urgent question is: what are you doing for others?" This was at the very heart of Jesus' ministry - doing for others, defeating evil by bringing more love into the world, lifting up those who are pushed aside in the world, calling out for peace and for justice, and reaching out in ways that turns our enemies into friends.

If I may state the obvious, we are a small congregation, but small is not synonymous with impotence. Jesus said that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains, pointing to the fact that small things can achieve big things. We can, and we do make a difference in our community and the world. Your great generosity in giving to the Neighborhood Center helps those in need and those who are homeless - it helps feed hungry dogs and cats and brings comfort to those in need of clean socks and underwear. Your donations to Toys for Tots help bring a little more Christmas joy to children in need. You provide space for those struggling with addiction to come together for mutual support, as well as providing a building for people of a different culture to come together for worship and ministry, and your support of Best Gifts aided in bringing help and hope to people thousands of miles from here. This is what Christian ministry is all about., , and I am sure that Jesus is pleased with what you do.

Tomorrow is a day of remembrance of the life of Dr. King, but I'm sure that he would feel that the day is not really about him as much as it is about that which he stood for and died for - an end to hatefulness, prejudice and discrimination, the equality of all people, and the struggle for peace in a world so filled with violence.

If I may, I will end with his own words. "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right". Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, whose very being is love, we thank you for the opportunity to gather this day in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. We come to know your Word made flesh and pray that your Word also be made real in us. We thank you for the mercy and forgiveness revealed through your Son, knowing that we do not always live up to what you desire in us. Hear our prayers, dear Lord. Reveal to us the ways in which you would have us minister to a world in great need, and may your Holy Spirit inspire and empower us in ways that make a difference in our community and beyond.

This weekend we take time to remember the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., his ministry and, above all, his dream. Help your Church to work towards the fulfillment of that dream, striving for peace, justice , and equality for all, in and through non-violent means, all to the glory of your name. Amen.