

Text: Luke 3: 15-22
Title: *Baptizatus Sum*
Date: 01.13.19
Roger Allen Nelson

This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoned, unjustified, terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

With those words Franklin Delano Roosevelt inaugurated his presidency in 1933. The United States was wedged between two world wars and mired in the deep trough of the depression. National confidence was at low ebb and solutions were elusive. The moment was pregnant with expectation. The President-elect needed to chart a course for this country and he began by speaking about fear.

...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

FDR knew that we are easily divided and paralyzed by fear. He knew that fear animates our worst instincts and cripples our best angels. He knew that the resolution of fear was somehow essential for progress and prosperity. So, he started with fear.

Dear friends, today fear is a dominate cultural motif.

We fear the other. We fear terrorism. We fear the immigrant. We fear the chaos of a constitutional crisis. We fear economic collapse. We fear a depleted and changing planet. We fear toxins in the air and in our food. We fear cancer. We fear failure and loneliness. We fear the very fear that divides us.....

Well. This morning, in that milieu, and in this moment, let us consider the baptism of Jesus as a spiritual resource, or an antidote, for fear. I would offer that as what our text proclaims is true then we are called to remember and live into that which drives out all fear.

Good?

Let's consider our text.

The four gospels don't all include nativity stories but they all give an accounting of the baptism of Jesus. In Mark's gospel the sky is ripped open, Jesus hears the voice of God, the Spirit descends, and Jesus is spewed out into the wilderness. It is an abrupt violent birthing. In Matthew's gospel John demurs when Jesus comes to be baptized and Jesus has to talk John into it. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist recounts that he saw the Spirit come down from heaven and alight on Jesus....

But in Luke, there is only this quiet little line:

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love..."

Or, as the Revised Standard Version has it:

You are my Son, the Beloved...

Let me make three simple observations about this text.
Think of them as three points.

Jon Hiskes grew up in the bosom of Reformed schools and churches, including a stint here at Hope. He and his wife now live in Seattle where they're part of a Mennonite fellowship. A few years ago, at the birth of their first child, Jon wrote to me about baptism in these two Christian traditions. In his words:

This helped me see one common trait of infant baptism and the infant blessing our church practices: They both derive their meaning not just from God but from the community. Without the congregation, each ritual loses its meaning. The church promises to "share in [the] child's nurture and well-being," as our hymnal puts it. We've already seen that promise kept in the form of dinners, hand-me-downs, kind words and a brilliant hand-made quilt given to Sam at his dedication. Then I realized another thing the two rituals hold in common: They're not magical acts. They don't change God's attitude toward the child or shift the baby's soul from eternal danger to eternal safety. Rather, they're signs of what we know to be already true about God's enthusiasm for his children.

I love that line: "God's enthusiasm for his children."

What Jon and our text point toward is the communal nature of baptism. Jesus is baptized in community. He is with and among the people being baptized by John.

At the heart of the gospels is the mystery of God's self-emptying in Jesus Christ ~ that God so loved us that he took on our very nature.

The baptism of Jesus is a picture of that self-emptying. Jesus, human and in humility, is joined with us in baptism. Sure, you could get hung up on the theological conundrum of why the Son of God would join in a baptism of repentance, but in doing so you might miss the staggering beauty of God with us and as one of us.

And, therefore the baptism of Jesus is not a private affair done in a heavenly chamber or tucked away somewhere off to the side. It's not an individualized spiritual reality disconnected from community life. It is done in and among people.

You are baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
And in doing so you are baptized into the community of Jesus.

You are not alone.
You belong to family of God in Christ.
Baptism, even for Jesus, is communal.

Second observation.

I wasn't baptized as a baby. I was baptized in my early twenties in a church in Iowa ~ wearing a tan polyester leisure suit, my hair a big pile of Greg Brady curls, and a string of pukka shells around my neck. When I knelt on the chancel steps and bowed my head the minister dribbled water over me that bounced off my hair, off my leisure suit, and onto the lime green carpet. I remember thinking that none of the water was staying on me and that I couldn't even get baptized right. I don't remember anything profoundly spiritual I remember the physical quality of the moment.

There is something very tactile about baptism.

From the very first chapters in Genesis the Spirit of God is likened unto a dove, or a bird. But, here, and only here, Luke inserts that "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove."

Now. You will find that phrase translated differently. Some have it that the Spirit descended like a dove. Others have it that the Spirit descended as a dove. Not knowing what to do with the Holy Spirit in bodily form some have the Spirit descending in the manner of a dove. It flutters and hovers and then alights. Rather than something physical and bodily....

But, either way, what's not to be lost is the tactile nature of the baptism of Jesus. There is something earthy, something physical, something that you can touch and feel and taste. John talks about a baptism coming with fire, but for Jesus there is the cool water of the river, his wet skin, the mud in his sandals, the blue of the sky, and the Holy Spirit descending in bodily form. It is a tactile experience.

There is no magic in the waters of baptism, but there is a physical act. In the Reformed tradition you aren't "saved" by the water, but it is a sign and a seal of a spiritual reality. Whether you're dunked in a river, dribbled on in Iowa, or sprinkled as a baby there is transitory expression of what is eternally true. And in some ways what we have left are the tactile reminders ~ the water as a window into being united in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Communal.
Tactile.

In each of the gospel accounts there is a voice from heaven. It is not always clear who hears it and there are little discrepancies in what the voice announces, but in our text the voice is first person possessive.

You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

I'm hard pressed to imagine a more powerful line from a father or a mother to a child.
Every child is longing to hear their parent affirm their love and blessing.
Every child is longing to hear that they belong.
Every child is longing to hear that they are delight of their parent's heart.

In baptism the identity and belonging of Jesus is affirmed.
In baptism your identity and belonging is affirmed.
You are a child of God in Christ.
You are the delight of God's heart.
You belong to God in Christ.

As the story goes when Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, was wrestling with despair and doubt and his own demons he would write on his desk or on his slate: *Baptizatus Sum*. It means "I am baptized." When faced with fear, when struggling with that which would divide or paralyze he would remind himself, "I am baptized." As one Luther scholar puts it, "Baptism was Luther's final anchor against doubt and despair, a gift of grace even apart from the faith of the recipient."

Dear friends, that's true today.
Whatever you fear,
whatever your demons,
whatever your struggle, your diagnosis, or the reality that you face,
whatever it is,
there is nothing to fear.
You belong to God in Christ.
That doesn't mean that there won't be hell and hard times.
That doesn't mean that there won't be experiences of darkness and despair.
But, ultimately there is nothing to fear.
You belong to God in Christ.
Therefore, you belong to the family of God.
And your baptism is a tactile reminder of that reality.

In a variety of ways, the church around the world and throughout the ages has found ways to help people "remember" their baptism. This morning we (Hope's Elders) invite you into one of those expressions. We invite you into a moment that is communal, tactile, and affirms your belonging to God in Christ. We invite into a reminder that there is ultimately nothing to fear.

The Elders will be coming forward and each will take a bowl of water from the fount. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. They will then scatter to a variety of places around the sanctuary. As Erin sings, "You are Mine" (feel free to join her) you are invited to go to the nearest elder who will dip his or her finger in the water and trace the lines of the cross on your forehead, saying to you, "You belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ." Your response: "Thanks be to God." Then return to your seat and join in the singing....

This is wholly voluntary. There may be all sorts of reasons why this makes you squeamish or self-conscious or simply outside of your comfort zone. Seriously, no worries, no judgement. Remain seated, join in the music.

This is intended to highlight and serve as a reminder of your baptism. This is not a baptism. But, if you haven't been baptized we don't want you left out. What this proclaims is still true. We'd encourage you to come forward or sideways as well. While it may not be a reminder of your baptism it is still a reminder of to whom you belong.

Dear friends, don't be afraid, you belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ. Come and be reminded by the waters of baptism.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.