

## Just the Beginning

January 9, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

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

So, today is what is known as “Baptism of the Lord Sunday” – a Sunday usually occurring near the first of the year, where we kind-of hit a “reset” button and give ourselves the opportunity to go “back to the beginning” of our journeys of faith, and remind ourselves of those most basic, most foundational questions: Where do we come from, and who are we in Christ?

And as we do that, we do two things: We remember the story of our own baptism – back to where we began – and we remember the story of Jesus’s baptism – the place where his public ministry began.

So, I’d like to start today with the story of Jesus being baptized. When it comes to this story, we actually have three different stories that we can choose from. Matthew, and Mark, and Luke all have their own baptism accounts. Probably the one that we are most familiar with is Matthew’s version. That one is definitely the most robust. Matthew gives us a vivid description of John the Baptist, wearing clothes made out of camel’s hair and living on a diet of locusts and wild honey. We may imagine him as sort-of a “wild guy” with crazy hair and an anger problem, as he yells insults at the crowds. “You brood of vipers!” he is fond of saying.

But then his demeanor softens when Jesus comes, and for the first time, maybe in his life, John is almost speechless. Jesus wants John to baptize him. And John’s response? “Why?” “I need to be baptized by you. Why are you coming to me?” “Of all people, Jesus, you are the *last* person who needs to be baptized. You don’t need to repent. You don’t need to turn away from anything. You are perfect. You are God. So what in the world are you doing here?”

But nevertheless John does what Jesus asks, and baptizes him in the Jordan River. And as soon as Jesus comes up from the waters, the heavens split open and the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and the voice of God booms out from the sky, announcing to everybody “this is my son, whom I love. With him I am well-pleased.”

And then, in the very next breath the scene shifts as the Spirit that just descended upon Jesus pushes him out into the wilderness so that Jesus can fast for 40 days and be tempted before he begins his public ministry.

So, that’s Matthew’s telling of this story.

Luke’s telling is very different. And Luke is where we are going to camp out today.

So, in Luke's story, we also start with John the Baptist. But, it's really interesting. Luke doesn't dwell a whole lot on John. We don't get this drawn-out description of what John wears, and what he eats, and what his favorite insults are. Luke actually seemed to be a whole lot more interested in John the Baptist's *parents* than he was in John himself. Luke tells the beautiful story back in chapter 1 of how John's mother Elizabeth found herself unexpectedly pregnant in her old age, and how his father Zechariah the priest was so beside himself with unbelief that the angel takes away his ability to speak for the duration of the pregnancy; we hear the story of Mary coming to visit Elizabeth, and John the Baptist, who was still in utero, leaping with joy in his mother's womb when he is met with the unborn Jesus.

But now that these two little babies are all grown up, we don't hear much more about John. From Luke's telling of the story, we get the feeling that John was a pretty charismatic guy. He drew a crowd, and people were enamored with him – to the point that many of them started asking him, “are you the messiah? Are you the one who is going to overthrow Rome?”

And John didn't really answer their questions, except to deflect attention away from himself. “There is someone coming after me who is far greater than I. I'm not worthy even to untie his sandals.”

And then, this is where Luke's story really breaks from Matthew's.

We see John being arrested. Last week we talked a bit about King Herod, and how crazy-insane of a guy he was. Crazy enough to have all of the toddlers in the kingdom mass-murdered, and crazy enough to have one of his 10 wives and three of his own sons executed.

It goes without saying that King Herod's family was a little bit of a mess. So, in addition to the three sons that Herod had killed, Herod also had another six sons. Two of them were named Herod Philip and Herod Antipas.

Herod Philip married his own niece, a woman named Herodius – the granddaughter of Herod the Great. Meanwhile, Herod Antipas was married to somebody else. But lo and behold, Herodius and her uncle/brother-in-law Herod Antipas fall in love, and both divorced their spouses to get married to each other.

John the Baptist was vocally opposed to the whole situation – so much so that he made some waves. And because the Herod family was ruthless, Herod Antipas issues the order for John to be arrested.

The story actually gets more sordid from there, but that's enough for right now. If you want to read more about the King Herod and John the Baptist soap opera, check out

Matthew chapter 14. If you think that some of today's television programs are racy, they don't hold a candle up to some of what is in the Bible.

So John is arrested, and Luke's gospel actually never tells us that John himself was the one who baptized Jesus. That whole exchange between the two of them is cut out when Luke gets distracted by detailing John's arrest.

But in the very next scene we see that Jesus and many other people have all been baptized. Jesus is praying, and while he is praying "the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends." And the voice of God booms from the sky, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well-pleased."

So, a couple of things to note here:

1. In Matthew, the heavens open just as soon as Jesus comes up out of the water. But in Luke, it doesn't happen until later – until after Jesus has already been baptized, and he is praying. Luke's gospel puts a lot of emphasis on the power and the importance of prayer. For Luke, things happen when we pray. In Luke's gospel, the real power does not happen in the act of baptism itself. It's in what we choose to do with life *because* we have been baptized. *Because* we are members of the kingdom of God. And what Jesus chose to do? He chose to pray. And that was when the Spirit of God showed up.
2. The second thing to note is what God said to Jesus in the voice that boomed from the clouds. In Matthew, God says "This is my son, the beloved. With him I am well-pleased." God is speaking in the third person, *about* Jesus. In Luke, the difference is subtle, but it is there. "*You* are my Son, the beloved. With *you* I am well-pleased." In Matthew, God is speaking to the crowds, and anyone else who can hear, establishing Jesus's identity and purpose. But here in Luke, God is speaking directly to his son. Should anyone else overhear, that's all well and good, but God's words were meant for Jesus, just as Jesus' prayer was meant for God.
3. And then finally, the third thing that is interesting here is what comes after this passage. In Matthew, immediately after the heavens close back up again, Jesus is sent into the wilderness where he fasts and prays for 40 days and he is tempted by the devil. But in Luke, before we get to the temptation, we have dropped here in the middle of the story, Luke's genealogy. What in the world is up with that?

Well, let's have a look at what's going on. Jesus is baptized. Which, in that tradition and time, meant something a little bit different than baptism means for us in the Christian church today. Baptism in Judaism was a sort of cleansing ritual. And the Jewish community had many different cleansing rituals – everything from washing hands before and after a meal, to women cleansing themselves every month after their period, to people performing a certain ritual cleansing after they had come into contact with someone sick, or after they had touched a dead body, to people washing their hands

before prayer, or before entering the temple, or before performing a sacrifice. It was, in a way, a kind of mindfulness exercise for the Jewish community. Letting go of something behind us so that we can be free to encounter and engage with the God who is in front of us. The Jewish people didn't wash, or cleanse, necessarily because they were dirty (although this was sometimes the case), but more as an act of preparation. In much the same way that you or I might put on nicer clothes to come to church, or to have dinner out with a loved one. It was a way to say to God, "okay, I am going to show up with intentionality. I am intentionally making the time and space for this encounter."

Cleansing rituals like baptism (among others) would also sometimes signal a rite of passage. A move from one time or space in life to another. A way to mark a transition. It might mark a conversion to Judaism, or it might mark another life event. It has been (and still is, in some circles) very common to see ritual cleansing before a wedding, or at the birth of a child, or before a bar or bat mitzvah, celebrating a young person's coming of age, or even before taking a new job, or moving into a new home. A way to say "my life is going to be different now than it was before. And I want to come to my new life prepared, with eyes wide-open. With a blank slate. Recognizing that anything is possible."

So when Jesus is baptized, the point is not that he is setting aside his old sinful ways and entering into a brand new life free from sin and brokenness. Jesus doesn't have old sinful ways to set aside. But it is marking a transition, from his life as a child, under his mother's care, to his ministry as an adult, taking his guidance and direction from his Father. Taking on his full role and responsibility as the Son of God. Taking a focused, intentional step into becoming who he came to earth to be.

And what does that mean?

Well, in a weird way, it is found in the genealogy, that seems like it is so randomly dropped in here.

"You are my son," God is telling Jesus. You are the next chapter in my story that goes all the way back to Adam. You are my answer to a world in which people eat the forbidden fruit, and brothers kill brothers, and countries enslave other countries and people bow down and worship golden calves and evil kings kill babies and their sons have prophets imprisoned so that they can continue to live their broken and sleazy lives in peace.

In a world – in a history – filled with brokenness and pain and sin; filled with soap operas and stories that are so risqué that preachers will forever be scratching our heads to figure out how to preach them; in the middle of a story that has caused God to shed more than a few tears, God is telling Jesus, you are my son. You are the next person in this long line of broken people, except that you are not broken. And it is through you that what is broken will be made whole again.

You are the one who will put this broken family tree back together again.

So my friends, as you and I come together today, we are people who know first-hand how messy the world can be. How broken, and how confusing, and how upside-down. And as much as I have heard a lot of folks lately talking about how much worse things are today than they have ever been before, if the stories of scripture tell us anything it is that actually not a whole lot has changed in the last 2,000+ years. We still wrestle with corrupt rulers and politicians; we still wrestle with questionable family dynamics and public scandals; we still demonize those who speak truth to power – and while we might not throw modern-day prophets in jail and have them beheaded, we certainly do all we can to discredit them.

Which is why it is so critically-important for us to have these moments – these re-set times in our spiritual journeys, when we can come, and feel the waters through which we have been washed clean, to intentionally step toward the God who calls us, and to remember our baptism. Because in remembering our baptism, we remember who we are, and whose we are. We remember that we are sons and daughters of the living God, deeply-beloved, and sent into the world to shine the light of Christ.

And we are created to take our place in the ongoing story of God's people – not as broken vessels but as children of God, washed clean and set free to bring hope to a hungry world.

*[Invitation to the waters]*