

## **Sermon Text – Sunday, January 12, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Acts 8:14-17; 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7  
Scripture for Message: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 – “Community”**

We are in the season of Epiphany; most of the Christmas decorations are gone, and the circle of life continues. This season of Epiphany reveals the glory of God and the light of the world. It reveals Jesus, as an infant, as a child in the temple and now as a grown man about to step into his role of Savior of the world. Jesus' baptism has long been a mystery to some, why was it necessary for Jesus to submit to baptism for repentance – there was no sin in him to repent.

John called those who came to for baptism by him to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Fruits that are manifest in mercy, fairness, and justice. Jesus joins the crowds coming for baptism in response to that call to bear fruits. Luke's story moves Jesus from being just another person in the crowd to being a savior with a mission and ministry built on mercy, fairness, and justice. Baptism is a response to God's call, marking a spiritual transformation and spiritual liberation.

I mentioned in my welcome that today we would hear the story of Jesus' baptism. Luke, however, does not give us an elaborate story of Jesus' baptism. There is only one verse that mentions the baptism itself. The three verses that our reading leaves out today mention that Herod had arrested John the Baptizer before Jesus' baptism. Luke mentions that “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.” Luke displays Jesus' humility in this account of his baptism. Jesus does not claim privilege by going to the head of the line, he does not demand an audience with the “chief” baptizer, he simply answers John's call to baptism and then quietly withdraws to pray, and there is an emphasis placed on that prayer.

This passage of scripture, coming as it does in our season of Epiphany, may be more about Jesus' identity than it is about baptism. Rather than give you a sermon on the importance and meaning of baptism, we'll save that for another year maybe when we read about it in Matthew's gospel. The scriptures we read this morning pull us more into thinking about Jesus' identity, how Jesus reveals who God is, and the role of prayer and community connection in Jesus' mission and ministry.

In Luke's gospel the baptism almost seems like an introduction to the Spirit descending and the heaven's opening. Jesus' baptism was not a private thing, Jesus' baptism is with the crowds. Then he retreats to pray, in Luke's gospel we read that Jesus does this a lot he prays and while he was praying the heaven opened. The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form – a dove. Do you think that the crowds saw that part? But the voice that came from heaven was to Jesus

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alone, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” I wonder, do you think this was the first time God spoke directly to his Son?

We know that Jesus knew who he was. Even when he was twelve years old, he knew that when he was at the Temple in Jerusalem he was in his father’s house. I don’t think Jesus needed to be reminded that he was God’s son, but maybe – at the beginning of his ministry, he needed the assurance that God, his father, had his back, was pleased with what he had set out to do and was beloved by him. Contrary to what some people might think, this revelation and the coming of the Holy Spirit did not make Jesus the “Son of God” he was that since his birth. These events did however empower Jesus for ministry. In the Gospel stories it was after his baptism that the Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness where Satan tempted him. I think maybe hearing God, his father, name him and claim him as beloved was something that would strengthen him as he was facing those temptations.

We believe that in those moments, Jesus gained strength for what he would encounter as he began his ministry. We believe that through the act of immersion in baptism Jesus transformed, buried in the waters to his old life and risen to a new life according to God’s will. Jesus’ baptism was not something that God compelled, it was however Jesus’ response to the grace of God and the divine love God freely gives. This public expression of faith defined Jesus’ faith and brought him into community with other believers. In addition, we view the act of immersion during baptism to be a symbol of Jesus death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus own baptism might have foreshadowed those events.

You might think, while reading Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism that the most important message is the Spirit descending in the bodily form of a dove after his baptism. You might think that it was the act of baptism that brought the Spirit into Jesus. But Luke tells us these things happen while Jesus was praying, after the baptism. It may have been only moments after, but it could also have been a longer period. What we heard in the reading from the book of Acts, and from Luke’s story as well, tells us that the Spirit had not yet come upon any of the Samaritans who disciples baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. That didn’t happen until Peter and John prayed for them and laid their hands on them, a community act.

I wonder if maybe an important part of what Luke recounts regarding Jesus’ baptism is the fact that Jesus’ baptism was with “all the people” and not in a private affair. The community came together for the Samaritans who had been baptized, and they received the Holy Spirit as the community [Peter and John] placed their hands on the new believers. That action of placing their hands on the believers incorporated them into a community, signifying acceptance as well as

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symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit with them. This tells me that the Spirit is part of the community of faith, and we can receive the Spirit through prayer and the community's participation.

Jesus was unknown until after his baptism. John was the “voice in the wilderness” making straight the paths of the Lord and preparing the way for the people to “hear” Jesus. John had quite a few followers himself and his message was compelling enough that some thought he might be the Messiah. John points to one “more powerful” one who is coming but not in the expected way. John tells the people that the one who will come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, fire to burn off the chaff. The description John gives of Jesus turns our minds to what we heard from the book of Isaiah this morning. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. . . Do not fear, for I am with you. . . I will gather you.” When we read these words, we use them to identify Jesus as the Messiah, and Luke records for us John's attempts to identify who Jesus is.

But then there is the baptism, and as Jesus prays the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends, and a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” That solidified Jesus' identity as the Son of God, precious, honored, and loved. Through baptism, Jesus declares a revolutionary commitment to God's plan and to the well-being of God's people. As the heaven opened and God gives a message of support to Jesus, calling him beloved, God sends the Holy Spirit to sustain and protect Jesus through the trials he will experience.

Maybe that is what our baptism does for us, solidifies us as precious, honored, and beloved children in the family of God. Through baptism God creates a bond linking us to the whole people of God.<sup>1</sup> Through baptism, “people pass through the waters under the protection of God, are called by name, and are formed and re-formed into God's people.”<sup>2</sup> God calls us, names us, claims us as his own prior to our response – when we follow Jesus into the waters it is our transformation and calling to God's service. The fact that we become part of the community of believers is equally important, we all have a role to play. As one commentary puts it, “God has so interwoven us together that some truths can only be known, some mysteries can only be solved, when we do it in community

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<sup>1</sup> D. Duane Cummins. *A Handbook for Today's Disciples in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Chalice Press. 2017. Print. p. 32

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long. “Baptism of the Lord: Isaiah 43:1-7, Connecting the Reading with Scripture”. *Connections Year C*, Vol. 1. Eds. Green, Long, Powery & Rigby. WJK. 2018. Print. 160-162

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together.”<sup>3</sup> Baptism isn’t our salvation, but baptism is an expression of faith that comes from our response to salvation. Baptism draws us into a community that enables us to grow spiritually and to learn from each other.

Our baptism identifies us as members of a congregation. In fact, in GA Resolution 7560 the General Assembly of the Disciples of Christ made this statement, “We, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), confess that all who are baptized into Christ are members of His Universal Church and belong to and share in His ministry through the People of the One God.” Baptism then, for this church means we are part of a community made whole in unity and love. Not only though members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) but members of the whole family of God within the universal church.

Coming as it does during the season of Epiphany this story of Jesus’ baptism illuminates for us who Jesus is and begins for us a journey that reveals the glory of God. I wonder if we take seriously the importance of community in our relationship with God. I know that there are some people who feel they don’t need anyone to accompany them in their walk of faith, that they can worship God on their own without any help from anyone. But I know in my heart that the presence of other believers strengthens my faith. I wonder if we are fully following Jesus if we try to go it alone. Jesus surely didn’t go it alone, Jesus gathered around him others who could walk beside him. The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus, and that relationship gave him strength. Even in the wilderness, when Satan tempts him, he had a host of angels who fed him and brought him water. Even God isn’t alone, God has the Son and the Holy Spirit to fulfill God’s promises and accomplish God’s work in the world. And God has us, each of us, using the talents God has gifted to us to do God’s work in our world.

We can’t do this alone; a solitary Christian is just a person with a belief. You can’t be a follower of Christ without following Christ and if you are worshiping alone, you aren’t following anyone. Luke gives us an account of Jesus baptized with a community and community is important to our identity as Christians and followers of Christ. That is what a church is for!

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<sup>3</sup> Charisse R. Tucker. “In the Lectionary: January 12: Baptism of the Lord” *The Christian Century* January 2025, p. 25