

John 3:15-17, 21-22 Baptism of our Lord 1.9.25 Bill Uetricht

Well, we've left behind Christmas, and we've entered the season of Epiphany. And this new season is taking us some place. The arrival of this season began with the visit to the home of Jesus by the so-called Wise Men, horoscope-reading men who are led by the stars, and most importantly, are not Jewish. They are not from Israel. They are foreigners. They have a whole different religious view. They are pagans.

Last week we discovered quickly that Christmas wouldn't allow us to stay in Bethlehem. In Epiphany, that becomes crystal clear. To be a Christ follower is to leave home. In Epiphany we are going someplace. We are on a trip, and frankly, it's a trip around the world. I don't think that it's an accident that our Psalm appointed for today likely came out of Canaanite (foreign) religion. Israel must have been secure enough to include sometimes poems and songs from other religions and nations.

I also don't think that on this first Sunday of Epiphany it is an accident that our second reading for today from Acts takes us to foreign-ville, Samaria. In Epiphany, we are leaving home. We're going someplace.

But before we get too far, we need to understand some basics. We need to grasp what we are traveling with. So, before we get out of town, we need to stop off at baptism, the baptism of Jesus, in particular. You see, before we begin our trip around the world, we need to know who we are. Jesus needed to know who he was before he headed out in his ministry. And his baptism made his identity unambiguous. A voice comes from heaven and proclaims: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus has a status. Using language that in the Old Testament would have been utilized for a king, Luke tells us that Jesus is a *Son*.

He's got a special and intimate relationship with God. He is beloved. And God takes delight in him and what he is about.

You hear these words, and you are taken back to Isaiah in our first reading when God describes Israel as "precious in his sight" and "honored." Now admittedly, in just a few verses prior to our text, God was ticked off with Israel, but now he makes it clear that this community is at the center of his affection. Ya, he gets mad at them, but the bottom line is that he loves this people, whom he created, formed, and redeemed.

Before we get too far, before we engage the world, we need to know who we are. To be honest, I have experienced people who are on their way to see the world, make the world a better place, but do so without a real strong sense of who they are or whose they are. These people often burn out or do a lot of their work with resentment or self-preoccupation. Some folks who haven't hung around the baptism stop for a long enough time either degrade themselves constantly or read everything that occurs in terms of whether their selves are being massaged enough.

Hear this, you who are the baptized. You have a status. Like Jesus, you are children of God. You are beloved. God takes delight in you. You are precious in God's sight and honored. This is the bottom-line truth you need to know before you go anywhere.

And you *are* going somewhere. Epiphany makes that very clear. It isn't a matter of choice. Even if you don't go to the world, the world will come to you. So, you need to be ready. You need a foundation. And you have one. It's a gift. It comes from God. It isn't yours to earn or achieve. It's called grace. It's called love. So, stop degrading yourself, and stop reading life through the lens of your insecure self.

Now before we leave this stop too soon it's worth our while noting something that Luke says about Jesus' baptism: "Now when

all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened.” Luke makes little fuss over Jesus’ individual baptism. Listen to his words again: “Now when *all* the people were baptized, and Jesus was *also* baptized...”

First of all, you get the sense that Jesus must be waiting to be the last to be baptized. I don’t know. I could be wrong, but I get the picture of Jesus being on the edge of the river helping everybody get into the water: Uncle Frank, who doesn’t have a humble bone in his body, Aunt Bertha, who uses a walker and really has a hard time getting into the water, Joshua, whom no one really likes, Jessica, who is quite beautiful and, honestly, loves all kinds of attention, and Bart, who likes the idea that baptism gives people a chance to be wowed by his pecs and biceps. Jesus is there, helping them all get into the water. And then he gets baptized.

Frankly, Luke doesn’t even tell us who did the baptizing. In Luke’s story, John has been put into prison before Jesus gets baptized. In many ways, Luke doesn’t tell us anything about the baptism. We aren’t given any cute, picture-worthy moments. We are just told that he was baptized with everybody else.

Here’s the deal: you are very special, but not that special. You go into the waters just like everybody else does. You put your pants and your slacks on just like everybody else. Your status is the same status that everybody else has. I like to encourage good self-esteem, but I do not encourage narcissism.

You have lots of money; you don’t have much money. You have good looks; you don’t have good looks. You have three degrees attached to your name; you have none. Nice! Very nice! But none of that matters for who you are underneath it all. And none of that gives you a higher status in the realm of God. And none of that makes you

better or worse than other people. We go into the water together with Jesus.

As I think about what it means to live into that truth, I am struck by the odd story that Luke in Acts provides us today. To be totally forthright, I am not sure what I think of the story. As I indicated before, the story gives us a picture of the gospel going outside of the hometown. We find ourselves in Samaria where a leader named Simon has done what appears to be good work in getting the foreigners (the Samaritans) into the Jesus story. Rejoicing in that, the apostles send some of the official representatives of the church to help them, Peter and John. It is said that these Samaritans had been baptized in the name of Jesus but hadn't gotten the full deal. The Spirit had not yet come upon them. And it appears that you need officialdom to make that happen.

Again, I am not so sure I like this notion. I am an institutional guy; I like to be a team player. But I am not so certain of the idea of needing the right people to be present in order for the big stuff to happen. Honestly, the church has used this throughout history to control people. Even now it seems to me, as we live in a time with fewer and fewer clergy, the church can handcuff congregations because they think that congregations have to have in place the right people with the right credentials in order for certain things to happen. I just don't think this serves the church of today.

So obviously I am not sure of this reading from Acts. Did Peter and John really have to show up in order for the Spirit to descend upon the Samaritans? That seems questionable to me.

But what isn't questionable to me is the notion that we who come out of the waters of baptism with everybody else are not free-range actors. Ya, we got status, lots of it. Ya, we are beloved. But that is not an invitation to think that we are accountable to no one. Pay

attention to caustic John the Baptist today who understands his place: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” I remain a servant.

I have quoted Bob Dylan before, but I think it is worthwhile to do it again:

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Epiphany is taking us on a trip. Before we get too far on that trip, it's worth our while remembering who we are. We are beloved children. We've got status . . . the same status as everyone else. We all go down to the water together. And we come out of the water together, given a new name: “Servants,” servants of the God we meet in Jesus.