

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 23, 2015

“A Vision and A Voice.”

Mark 1:8-13

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus. Yes, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus usually in January, however, it is very fitting for today. Whether you are a long-time church member or you are seeking to discover more about Christianity, most folks have heard the word “baptism.” Some people refer to the event as “christening.” Regardless of the word used, it is associated with a special church ritual for babies soon after they’re born or with adults when they realize Jesus is their Lord and Savior.

There is much about baptism that is worth thinking about. Baptisms happen fairly often here. We follow certain procedures to prepare for it. There are conversations with the pastor about the meaning of baptism. A date is set when family and friends can be present at the service. Sponsors, sometimes called godparents, are selected.

On the day of the baptism, there is an air of excitement. During the service, the children of the congregation are always eager to come forward and get a firsthand look of the new person to be baptized. With babies or very young children, the parents are frequently nervous that their child is too noisy during the baptism. The godparents are proud to have been asked to be part of the child’s life. The grandparents beam proudly from their pew and, lots of pictures are taken during and after the service. Of course, there is the baby, well, today there are several, who are the center of attention—whether asleep or awake—whether quiet or screaming.

Important words are said during the baptismal service. “Do you promise to fulfill these obligations?” “We do!” “Do you believe in God the Father?” “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” “We welcome you into the Lord’s family...” There are also significant actions that are part of a baptism: the splashing of water, the sign of the cross, the lighting of a candle. No matter how many baptisms we have, each one is a special occasion. Not even the most loudly crying baby can mar the event. You should think that is how the Bible would have described Jesus’ baptism. As important as baptism is, and as important as Jesus is, you would think his baptism would have been rich with religious ceremony. However, Mark devotes only three short verses to it. No mention about the words said or the promises made. No mention about godparents. No sign of the cross. No baptismal candle. Only a vision and a voice!

The vision was of opening heavens. No mention of golden shafts of light zeroing in on Jesus. There was only the appearance of a bird—a simple dove at that. And then, the voice: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Of course, John the Baptist did not have the Book of Worship to use at Jesus’ baptism. Nor was Jesus dressed in a white robe that had been worn by his parents at their baptisms. But when all is said and done, that dove and voice tell the real story of what baptism is all about.

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens open up and God’s Spirit descended like a dove on him.” The only time in the entire Bible that God’s Spirit is identified with a dove is at the baptism of Jesus. Yet, for 2000 years the descending dove has been the church’s most widely used symbol of God’s Holy Spirit. The dove’s appearance said in no uncertain terms that God’s Spirit was right there in the middle of the event.

The liturgy doesn’t call for the use of live doves at a baptism (maybe it should). But what’s important is that God’s Spirit is equally present today as parents, sponsors, and children gather around the baptismal font. Baptism is far more than a nice religious ritual we conduct for children and adults. It is an occasion when God’s Spirit is right here among us!

Whether it is a baby who is presented by parents and sponsors, or whether it is an adult who is presenting himself to be baptized, the living God is in the middle of the people gathered here. God has promised to be here just like God was present at Jesus’ baptism.

Then there is the voice. The words of the voice echoed in the Old Testament Servant Song of Isaiah 42 which told of the mission and purpose of the life of the one to whom they were spoken: “I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” It’s not an easy task to bring forth justice in the world, or to work for an end to human suffering, or to bring peace where there is hatred and discord. And yet, that is the mission which is laid upon every person who is washed in the waters of baptism.

Justice does not happen naturally. Peace is elusive when the conflict of human wills are involved. Human suffering is easier to ignore because of its painfulness. But those are the arenas of life to which Jesus was sent. And because of our baptism, those are the arenas of life to which we are sent—to do something about them. We are to bring about healing, reconciliation, and change. We are to bring an end to injustice and oppression. We are to care for the hungry and homeless. We are to work to make peace a reality.

It takes special power to face those kinds of issues. Are we good enough for the task? Are we capable enough for the task? Listen again to the voice: "You are my son...you are my daughter. With you I am well pleased." God is saying that God accepts us just as we are--at a time when we are small, helpless, and crying--at a time when we cannot even say God's name--at a time when we don't even know any theology about God. What's more, God tells us that once the waters of baptism have flowed over our head, it's good for life! It's grace upon grace for God to make such a promise to us right at the start before we've even had the chance to botch things up!

Unfortunately, this is where Christians begin to quibble among themselves. Some say we've got to be old enough to understand what we're doing before the promise can be given to us. Others say that we can lose the promise if we don't stay on the straight and narrow.

Friends, such arguments put the focus in the wrong place. I am convinced that when we come face-to-face with a love that accepts us the way we are with no strings whatsoever attached, we cannot help but respond with the kind of gratitude God seeks. Baptism is not some kind of "magic spell" or "death insurance" policy that we take out on little children. Baptism is about life, because baptism is an entrance into the life of Jesus Christ and into the life of Christ's Church. Whether we are baptized as an infant or as an adult, in baptism we are marked as belonging to God. We baptize young children, not because we are obsessed with the ritual, but because we want them to grow up in the love of Jesus Christ. We as parents, grandparents, godparents, and congregation, have an awesome responsibility to teach the children about God and his unconditional love, about his amazing grace, about his great sacrifice by having his own Son killed for our sins so that we may live.

This morning I have asked you to remember the vision and the voice at Jesus' baptism, because it is the same voice that was present at your baptism, or will be present on the day you will be baptized. Always remember the words and actions which are part of that day to remember: "Pour our your Holy Spirit upon this person; the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence." Remember the sign of the cross made upon your forehead with the words: "Child of God, (today) you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."