

The Water is Calling Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism of the Lord/ 9th January 2022

Did you notice something odd about Luke's account of Jesus' baptism? Something is missing. We don't actually "see" Jesus getting baptized. We're told that it happened, but we don't "see" it.

In Luke's Gospel, we have the story of John the Baptist preaching and baptizing in the River Jordan. Twenty verses in chapter three describe John's ministry. The people approach the riverbank wondering if John might be the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ. He says, "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. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

In Luke's Gospel, we don't have Jesus arriving at the river asking to be baptized. We're missing John's initial refusal to baptize Jesus. We're missing Jesus going down into the water. We're missing Jesus coming up out of the water as a dove descends upon him and the heavens declare his identity. We never "see" Jesus' baptism.

Instead, Luke writes, "Now when all the people *were* baptized, and when Jesus *also had been* baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22).

What do we make of this? What is Luke trying to say regarding Jesus' baptism? Does it impact the way we view our own baptism? This Sunday, all of this seems relevant as we remember Jesus's baptism and consider our own.

The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) is correct when he says, "The Church does not dispense the sacrament of baptism in order to acquire for herself an increase in membership but in order to consecrate a human being to God and to communicate to that person the divine gift of birth from God."¹¹ Both Protestants and Catholics can attest to this. We lessen the meaning of the sacrament when we think of it in terms of membership in the church. We also diminish the importance of baptism when we believe it's only about being engrafted into Christ's family tree, a welcomed member of God's household, the Church. Yes, all of this is true. These views form part of what baptism has come to mean in the Church, all for good reasons. However, baptism meant something very different, both for Jesus and the first Christians.

Baptism was originally an act of initiation, initiation into *the life and work of God*. It was a ritual of consecration in which one was identified with and affirmed as a child of God and then set apart *for God*. It was an act of preparation, repentance, focus, which paved the way for something else to happen, for what came next, which was the whole point of the ritual. Baptism prepares you to claim your identity as God's beloved, "the divine gift of birth from God," and then discover why you were born in the first place, to discover the reasons for your existence, to

fathom the depths and desires of your soul, and then to serve God with all your soul—and heart, and mind, and strength (Luke 10:27).

Poet Mary Oliver (1935-2019) once asked, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”¹²¹ Why were you born? Why do you exist? Why are you here? What is being asked of you in the time that you have? What wants to come into the world through you? Baptism is, in many ways, an ancient-yet-modern rite that helps us answer these questions. And it’s this aspect of baptism that has even greater meaning for us as adults.

What’s so striking about Luke’s account is that, yes, we have water (and that’s important) and the act of baptism itself (which is also essential), but he seems to be placing greater emphasis upon what happens *after* baptism. Because it’s only *after* his baptism—note, as Jesus was *praying*—that heaven opens to him. It’s only *after* his baptism that the Holy Spirit then descends on him “in bodily form” (Lk. 3:22). And it’s only *after* his baptism, not during it, that he hears the voice from heaven say, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased” (Lk. 3:22).

All of which leaves us with the impression that baptism is an act of *preparation*, a ritual and practice that invites us to claim who we are and discover what is expected of us. The water calls, invites, summons us to enter into its depths, to go down deep and enter into the flow of the water, to bathe in it. Allow the water to wash over you, cover you, bury you, allow the water to cleanse you. Its soluble waters have the power to loosen all the dirt and grime of your life, all the things from your past that you hold on to or that hold you back, all your burdens and regrets and sins that need to be washed away. The early church viewed baptism as a kind of death, where we put to death or remove the things in our lives that devitalize us, that no longer serve us well because they are no longer in service to life, no longer life-giving. It can all be washed away.

But we don’t stop with the washing. The washing clean, the dying to former ways is done in service to what comes *next*. We come up out of the water, rising to new life, to resurrection-life, ready for what comes next. Having been bathed, cleansed, and refreshed in the water, we’re now ready to pray and in prayer, become attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Attentive in prayer, we become *open*—and isn’t this what prayer is, being attentive? When we’re open, we’re ready, finally, to hear what our baptism has prepared us for all along, open and prepared to hear and begin to fathom and embody what we couldn’t hear or understand or know before we were baptized, to know as Jesus discovered that we, too, are the Beloved of God.

You are a child of God. That’s who you are, at the core of your being. This is what we discover after moving through the waters. In many respects, it’s easier for us to say these things to infants and children when they’re baptized, to assure them that they are, right from the start, beautiful children of God, which they are. What about us? As we grow up and gather the dust and dirt of our lives, it’s tough for us to know or remember that we, too, are God’s children. Sometimes the poor choices we’ve made along the way as adults, the mistakes and hurts and wrongs and regrets cause us to question our identity and place in God’s family. These waters

remind us of who we are and why it's important for us to claim the meaning of our baptism—as adults.

And we can't stop there. Knowing that you are God's beloved is only the starting point. As we know, there's work for us to do, there's ministry to be done. Now, as a beloved child of God, claim who you are: *live* as a beloved child of God and *love* as a beloved child of God, and *give* as a beloved child of God, *serve* as a beloved child of God. Isn't this what Jesus discovered at the Jordan? Wasn't this the pattern of his life? Didn't it then shape his ministry? Of course. Are we not baptized into Christ? The same, then, is true for all of us. He is the pattern of our lives. He is the way. He is our way.

Luke appears to place greater emphasis on what happens after baptism; baptism prepares Jesus to hear the summons, and then the experience sends him into ministry. In Luke's telling, we learn Jesus is God's Son in 3:22, where we're given his *divine* lineage. And then, starting at verse 23, Luke provides a genealogy that goes back to Adam, establishing a *human* lineage. Knowing his divine-human identity, Jesus is then sent into the wilderness, "full of the Holy Spirit" (Lk. 4:1). After enduring his ordeal in the desert, Luke tells us, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee" to begin his ministry in Nazareth (Lk. 4:14), where we find Jesus in the synagogue reading from the scroll of Isaiah, reading these words:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

To be baptized is to be claimed by God.
If claimed, then anointed.
If anointed, then called.
If called, then sent by the Holy Spirit.
The work of the Spirit is your work.
The work of the Spirit is our work, together.
We're all swimming in the same water.
We are born and born again—and again and again—in the waters of our baptism.
Here we realize who we are and why we were born.
Here we discover—again and again—the summons and purpose of our lives.

^[1] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (Ignatius Press, 1991).

^[2] Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).