

Questions of the Heart
Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 7, 2007
Reverend Benjamin Broadbent

Morning Scripture:

Our scripture lesson today is taken from the Gospel of Luke. It is Chapter 3, and it starts with verse 15 through 17 and continues in verses 21 through 22. This is the Word of the Lord.

“As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming, and I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his grainer. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’”

Verse 21 goes on with, “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 a bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”

Herein ends the reading. May the Lord bless it to our hearing and to our understanding.

Rev. Broadbent:

I have to confess to the fear, and I think any honest minister who has been asked to administer a baptism would agree with me, that sometime during the baptismal ceremony I am going to say, “Baptized by Jordan in the John.” This is a consuming fear of mine.

I don’t think I have said it yet. I know that I probably will, but now that I have named the fear, it does not have quite as much power over me. But if I or other ministers who administer baptism are true to the Gospel of Luke, we need not worry about this. In fact, we should not even say “Baptized by John in the Jordan.” That does not happen in the Gospel of Luke.

Now if you have your Bible open, you can look at that. But essentially, as you study the baptism accounts in the four Gospels, it becomes very clear that this is a contentious issue in the early church, namely, why was Jesus baptized? Why, if he is the one who is our model of perfection, why would he be baptized in the water, a sign of repentance for sins? Why would the “sinless one” give himself to the water, along with all of the rest of us?

Questions Of The Heart

January 7, 2007

Well, Mark's community apparently has no problem with it. He just says, "Jesus went and was baptized by John in the Jordan River." In Matthew, we get a little bit of the controversy. Now, there is a little banter back and forth between John and Jesus. John says, "Whoa, wait a second. I know who you are, and I should not be baptizing you. In fact, would you baptize me?" And Jesus has to explain to him, "This is the right thing to do for now." In other words, "John, just do it."

Then we get to the Gospel of Luke. And I must point out that whenever you see a scripture reading listed the way it is in your bulletin, with a little comma, you should ask yourself, as I have learned to, what verses are missing. This is the way it appears in the lectionary reading. Someone chose to exclude verses 18, 19, and 20. This is what appears there. Essentially, it is the story where Herod has John thrown into prison.

So, in the Gospel of Luke, John does not baptize Jesus. Whenever anybody tries to tell you that the Gospels and scripture are a seamless garment with no contradictions, this is one place you could point out to them. In the Gospel of Luke, there is no John doing any baptizing of Jesus, and there is no Jordan River explicitly stated with regard to Jesus' baptism.

By the time we get to the Gospel of John, Jesus is not baptized. Read it. John is doing some baptizing, and he sees Jesus walking along the shore of the river, and he says, "Behold the lamb of God." But Jesus is not baptized in the Gospel of John. It was a controversy. There were conflicting ideas about what it means for Jesus to be baptized.

And I think those same questions, the same controversy, are alive for us today. It invokes what I think are some of the most precious questions of our heart, like, "Who am I?" "What is my purpose?" "Am I truly beloved?" "And if so, how shall I live?" "What does it mean to be a person of faith?" "What does it mean to belong to a church, to a community?" "How is it that God's love might be embodied in and through even me?"

I think the message of Jesus' baptism is that in Jesus' baptism we learn something about what it means to be human. Our question, "Who am I?" is tied up in the question, "Who is Jesus?" What does this mean that he would submit himself to the same baptism that all of us fallen and fumbling folk might also submit ourselves to?

I think it means something like this, that Jesus, in allowing himself to be baptized, allowed himself to become fully human, to wade into the water waist deep with everybody else. And the reading of Luke, I think, lends itself to that reading. Now, when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized, I imagine him not as the celebrity that everybody's pointing

Questions Of The Heart

January 7, 2007

out, like in the Gospel of John, but a guy just wading into the water with everyone else, knowing that the way to be conscious of his divinity leads through the water in becoming conscious of how deeply human he is.

I think this is actually a very orthodox reading of baptism, this notion that Jesus is a mirror in which we see humanity as both fully human and fully divine. He mirrors what it means to be fully human.

Can we really accept this? I have asked you to do this before, and I will ask you again. Consider the most unlovable part of yourself, the most human. Jesus, in his baptism, meets you there. Not in some kind of best sense of yourself or some grandiose idea of who you might be, but in the all too real reality of whom you actually are.

I cannot say this any better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer does. I just got this book yesterday, "A Year With Dietrich Bonhoeffer." It is edited by Carla Barnhill. "And on January 1st," this is the reading, "behold God became human. The unfathomable mystery of the love of God for the world. God loves human beings. God loves the world. Not an ideal human, but human beings as they are. Not an ideal world, but the real world. What we find repulsive in their opposition to God, what we shrink back from with pain and hostility, namely real human beings, the real world. This is for God. The ground of unfathomable love. God loves real people, without distinction. God stands behind the real human being and the real world."

Whenever I think of baptism now I think of March 19, 2003. Does that date ring a bell for anyone? It was the beginning of the Iraq War, the deadline, the final deadline. And at that hour, a small group of us, 15 or 20 of us, were over at First Christian Church celebrating baptism by emersion. And I thought, "Thank you. This is exactly where I want to be." Because in that moment, so aware of the failings of humanity, with the world crashing down all around us, with the best human efforts falling short, we were baptizing, and we were separating ourselves. But not to say, "We are better than humanity. If they would only ask us, we would have had the proper response. But because "they" is us, and in celebrating baptism, we, in that moment, entered into, as painful an hour as that was, we entered into what it means to be fully human.

This is the paradox of baptism. The paradox of the whole church and that is that we are set apart, not as being more than human or better than human but as being fully human. And that is why we celebrate baptism. That is why baptism marks the beginning of the life of faith in Christ, not because it marks some sort of moral superiority. I have reached some level, and now I get somehow commissioned to kind of teach others what I have learned about how to live, but because in that moment we are willing to be fully human and to fully face our humanity.

Questions Of The Heart

January 7, 2007

Well, as we consider the Gospel of Luke and Jesus' baptism as a baptism into being fully human, we also must consider the word "spirit," because John speaks of, and Luke speaks of, throughout not only his Gospel but the other book he wrote, the Acts of the Apostles, of the movement of the spirit. And I think what Luke is trying to tell us is that in order to be aware of, to embrace, to begin to embody our divinity, we must first become fully human.

So baptism into the water is baptism into fully humanity. Baptism of the spirit is then enabled. We would be able to draw, without leaving our humanity, closer and closer to God and begin to embody the love that God has for all humanity offered in baptism of the water. And we open ourselves up to, and here is the other word for the day, an epiphany. Fully entering into our humanity, our eyes are now opened to reality, to how we actually are. Then we can see God's glory all around us and in every person, and we can point it out, even when someone else does not recognize it.

The story of incarnation, which we just celebrated, and the story of Jesus' baptism are not about humans who by their own effort are elevating themselves to some kind of higher consciousness. It is about God loving the world so much that He wades into the water with us, each one of us without distinction, and offers us the possibility of hearing these words, "You are my beloved."

Amen.