

“Open Water”

Luke 3

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Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke were told both of the birth of Jesus and of Jesus’ cousin, John – John is the one who will prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah, and John comes to be known as John the Baptist, offering a baptism of repentance, a turning to God and a looking for the Messiah. John attracts a lot of attention – many wonder if he is the Messiah – and in the midst of all of this, Jesus shows up, to be baptized too...

A few weeks ago I thought about an experience I had while I was living in Phoenix, which means somewhere around 15-20 years ago now – although it’s actually an experience I’ve thought of fairly often over the years. I don’t know exactly when it was, but the setting was a planning retreat for a group I was a part of – the Board of a Christian-based agency fighting hunger in Phoenix – there were folks from various denominations represented. As our Board retreat ended we had a closing worship service – it was a fairly small group, a lovely intimate setting in a home, informal, seated in a circle – and we shared communion. Except that as the elements were passed around I noticed that one man did not take any bread and didn’t drink from the cup. In the moment that was distracting to me and a bit disturbing; so I asked him about it afterwards - and he told me that he as a Christian had decided not to receive the communion elements – ever - as a way of being in solidarity with the people that the church excludes from communion – and until all people were welcome “at the table” he would not receive the bread and cup – it was his own fast of repentance on behalf of the exclusion of the church. Hmm – I

don't recall who in particular he saw as excluded, I just know I thought –
hmm – really?! – I didn't know if I liked it or agreed with it – but I know it
made an impact on me...hmm...and I wonder if he is still fasting from
communion today.

This is not a sermon about communion. This is a sermon about
baptism – about the story from Luke of the baptism of Jesus and about
baptism in the life of the church and at Hope Church – but for this sermon
about baptism I thought of that communion experience in Phoenix because I
was wondering this week about the idea of putting a hold on baptism here at
Hope Church – fasting from baptism as an act of repentance for the
shortcomings of the church. What if we would move the font out of the
sanctuary - replace it with a sign “fasting from baptism until further notice” -
no water, no more liturgy to remember our baptism - and when parents
present children for baptism, or youth or adults are to be baptized, we would
say to them: “we invite you to join in our fast from baptism”? I don't think I
like the idea...but I want you to understand why I was thinking about it...

It's because of Tiger Woods – I swore I wasn't going to bring up that
situation in a sermon – I expect you all know about it; it's bad enough to have
a couple's marital crisis splashed all over the media. God bless them both and
their family for healing and wholeness – that's all I would say, and I wouldn't
say it in a sermon. Except that this past week Brit Hume as part of a Fox
News panel decided to say that the real answer for this crisis was for Tiger
Woods to stop being a Buddhist and become a Christian – because only faith
in Jesus Christ can help him; and when Mr. Hume was challenged on this he
just went further in expressing the superiority of Christianity. This has led to a
fascinating national discussion in the media – about religious intolerance or
tolerance, about religious pluralism or exclusivity; and it led to a brutally

funny skit on the Daily Show – a late night news show parody...it was a panel basically marketing their various religions as the best - Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism – religion was presented as a ‘my God is better than your God’ contest meant to get you into the right club – just pick the one with the most benefit for you.

I see that parody of religion – and I laugh because it is so bitinglly accurate (I am not officially recommending that you look up the Daily Show because it has plenty in it that could be offensive)...but as I see it I also get so frustrated and sad and depressed BECAUSE it is so accurate – I hear people laughing, laughing at religion, and deservedly so, and I think at the same time “no wonder people find the church irrelevant” (a recent study showed most 18-29 year olds have a negative view of the church) but also “that’s not the way it has to be.” And I think about baptism.

Why baptism? Because if you want a good test case for what Christianity is about, then baptism is a good place to look: what is baptism? Why do we practice baptism as Christians? There have been a few volumes written about that over the centuries. But what if you were a visitor here today new to Christianity? What if you heard that all the folks here were baptized, and you were not? What if you are a regular part of Hope Church and you or your child is not baptized? What does that mean? Is baptism an act that means you are in with God or not?; that means you are a child of God or not?; that means you are going to heaven or not, which is to say, to hell? Is the water of baptism the way of bringing you into the right religion and spiting all others? Baptism has been expressed that way at times - it has been understood that way within and outside the church.

Well – have you ever wondered...why was Jesus baptized? I think that’s an interesting question to ask... Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist –

John was offering a baptism of repentance: did Jesus need to repent? That doesn't seem right, since Jesus is the Messiah, without sin; Jesus is baptized: and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, almost like a dove – so was the Holy Spirit not with Jesus before that? That doesn't seem right, since the Holy Spirit was the genesis of Jesus' human life – here the Spirit anoints Jesus for his ministry ahead, but it is not a new presence; Jesus is baptized: and there is a voice: “this is my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased” – so before that was Jesus not the Son of God, not loved, and God the Father/ Mother not pleased with Jesus? That doesn't seem right, since Luke has told us that Jesus was born as the holy one of God, the Lord – well loved and pleasing, sounds like to me.

So why was Jesus baptized? Why did he choose to be or need to be or feel called to be baptized? Jesus was baptized... ‘along with all the people’ we're told – Jesus gets in line with the crowds – and is baptized as they all are – all the people. I think part of this story is that Jesus was baptized to be in solidarity with all those people – all in need of repentance, in need of the Holy Spirit to rest on their lives, in need of hearing the voice of God saying: ‘you are my beloved child and you are pleasing to me.’ Jesus was baptized along with all the people in order to be shown as the One who could, who would, who does embody all that God offers to and intends for all people.

Why are we called to be baptized? – it's what Jesus instructed his followers to do and what Christians have always done – the church baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – why? Well - we DO need repentance...to turn from sin to God's ways of forgiveness and life; and we DO need the Holy Spirit, as the community of faith gathers with a deep need for God's gifts to sustain and guide us, to heal and empower us; and we DO need to hear the voice of God, that both claims us as beloved children of God

and calls us to live in ways pleasing to God. We need all those things for us and for our children in baptism. ...But if those are the only reasons – then baptism will only be about us, and for us – and we will start to think that we possess baptism, and that we dispense the waters – we will start to see baptism as something that makes us special, setting us not just apart but above - start to see the baptismal waters as a private pool.

Which is why this story of Jesus' baptism is so important for us – because the baptism of Jesus wraps all that baptism is for us into something greater than us, as our baptism echoes Jesus' baptism as well: as we, like Jesus, come to the waters along with all the people. Jesus teaches us that baptism is not our possession, but a gift given to place ourselves in solidarity with all people – baptism equips us to immerse life in the flow of God's grace; that's a demanding task, and so we need the water to sustain us - as followers of Jesus in a world that needs repentance, in a world that needs the healing Spirit of peace, in a world that needs to see the truth of being God's children.

We echo the story of Jesus' baptism, standing with all people – and that echo sounds nothing like talk of superiority and exclusivity (and even if you thought that was the ideal way to go, the church has squandered the right to that tone with all it has and continues to need to repent for); what it does sound like is a voice of service and justice, of love and hope and peace - speaking those truths to the false powers of this world and life – and grateful to God for any who would join in that voice, whatever creed they may be. It is not a voice that needs to apologize for being Christian or for being baptized, but one that speaks out of the waters of baptism that touched a Savior who stood in solidarity with all people – who gave his life for the life of the world.

Taking a fast from baptism? – when it is misused by the church as a private pool, I could understand the meaning of such a fast; but instead of taking baptism away, let's be renewed in what it truly is...even though New Years isn't part of the liturgical calendar, while we're still close to it on the daily calendar, here's a New Year's resolution for Hope Church: see reflected in these waters always the story of Jesus Christ that opens us to God's Spirit and God's voice and God's children – the gift that opens us to stand with all people, in need of God's grace each one. See reflected in these waters our calling in Jesus Christ - to offer God's grace to a thirsty world.

AMEN.