

For Your Ears Only
A Sermon for Every Sunday
The Baptism of the Lord
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

This Sunday is called “The Baptism of the Lord,” and one of the things I’ve done in the Baptist churches I’ve served—where we baptize believers by immersion—is to invite people to remember their baptisms, and because all of them had reached the age of accountability when it happened, and because being plunged under the water is such an unforgettable act, many of them can. I remind them: “We won’t be ‘re-baptized.’ We won’t even ‘renew’ our baptisms. But those of us who can remember will come forward in just a little while to have a few drops of water sprinkled on our heads in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to remember that holy moment when those words were first spoken over us. We were baptized, in part, because Jesus was, and as we prepare to remember our own baptisms it seems only right and good that we spend a few moments remembering his.”

Unlike our own baptisms, however, none of us was there. We have to depend on the memories of others for our knowledge of this event, specifically the memories of the Gospel writers. The story of Jesus’ baptism is found in all four Gospels, which says something about its importance to the early church, and each Gospel mentions John the Baptist, which says something about his influence on that church. In the Fourth Gospel it is John himself who tells the story of Jesus’ baptism. God had told him that the one on whom he saw the spirit descend and remain would be the one he was looking for. And so, John baptized with water, waiting for that moment, and in chapter 1, verse 32, he says of Jesus, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” And in verse 34 he adds, “I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

Matthew is the one who tells us how John objected to baptizing Jesus, saying that it should be the other way around, that Jesus should be baptizing him. But Jesus answered, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Then John consented, and Jesus was baptized, and “just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’” (vss. 16-17). Mark’s story is very similar to Matthew’s; in fact, Matthew got much of his best material from Mark. But there is a difference. In Mark’s version “just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Mark 1:10-11).

But it is Luke’s version we are most interested in today, here in Year C, when most of our readings will come from the Third Gospel, and Luke’s version is different from all the others. Like the others, it features John the Baptist, who was such a charismatic figure that some people thought he, himself, might be the Messiah. It’s in this Gospel that Jesus says about him, “I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John” (Luke 7:28). But Luke also chooses to tell us just before he describes Jesus’ baptism that Herod—who had been rebuked by John for carrying on with his brother’s wife, and for of all the other evil things he had done—“added to them all by shutting John up in prison” (Luke 3:19). You won’t find this in our lectionary reading for today because it interrupts the flow of the narrative. Luke tells us about John’s imprisonment and then he tells us that all the people were baptized and Jesus, too, was baptized, so that you wonder, “Wait a minute! If John was in prison, who was doing the baptizing?” I don’t think Luke means for us hear it that way. He’s just come to the end of his

story about John and wants to finish it up before proceeding to his story about Jesus. But listen to the way it affects the telling: “John was shut up in prison, all the people were baptized, and Jesus also was baptized.” You get the feeling that the big event down by the Jordan is over. John has been carried off to prison, all the people have been baptized, and there is Jesus all by himself, praying.

To be completely fair to the text it doesn’t say that Jesus was “all by himself,” but it does say that he was praying, and typically in this and the other Gospels when Jesus prays he does it alone. Luke 5:16 says that Jesus would “withdraw to deserted places and pray.” In Luke 6:12 we are told that he “went out to the mountain to pray, and spent the night in prayer to God.” In the Garden of Gethsemane he “removed himself a stone’s throw from the disciples” in order to pray. For Jesus, apparently, prayer is not a group exercise. So when Luke tells us that he was praying after his baptism we get the picture of Jesus alone, John in prison, all the crowds gone. Only then does Luke tell us that the sky was opened. Not “torn open,” as Mark says, but “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.”

What is common to each of these stories is this: 1) John the Baptist; 2) Jesus’ baptism; 3) the sky, or “the heavens”; 4) the Spirit; 5) descending; 6) “like a dove”; 7) and, finally, a Voice, and it’s the Voice I want to spend a few moments talking about. In the Fourth Gospel the Voice comes to John alone and says, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” It is a clue to the true identity of Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel the Voice makes an announcement, which is apparently intended for everyone: “*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased!*” In Mark’s Gospel the Voice says, “*You are my Son,*” which makes it a little less demonstrative, a little more personal. But still there are all those

people around to hear the voice, or at least John, who was standing right there beside Jesus. It is only in Luke's Gospel that you get the idea of a voice whispering so quietly, so personally, so privately, that Jesus alone can hear it: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

But here's a good question for this First Sunday after Epiphany, when we are celebrating the ways in which Jesus' true identity was revealed to the world: If he was the only one who heard the Voice how would others know who he was? Wouldn't it be hard for him to get a hearing, to fulfill his mission, if everyone thought he was just another of the many who had been baptized by John? It occurs to me that for those people who are called into ministry now the Voice is often very personal, very private. It is whispered rather than shouted. The seminaries want you to talk about your experience of call but it's never quite as evident as you would like it to be. "Did you hear a voice?" they ask. "Well, not really," you answer. "It was more like a growing sense of conviction that this was the right thing for me to do." "Well, did anyone else hear a voice? Did the heavens open? Did a dove flutter down?" "No," you answer, embarrassed. "It was just, kind of . . . a feeling." "A *feeling*!?" they sneer. "You had a *feeling* that you ought to go into ministry!" And by now you're wishing that the heavens *had* been torn open, that a whole *flock* of doves had fluttered down, and that the voice of God had shouted through a bullhorn, "This is my Child, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased!" That sense of calling is such a private thing, such a personal thing, that you sometimes wonder if you really heard it.

I have this idea that everyone is called into ministry and God has to make do with the ones who say yes. Wouldn't it be something if it turned out that God had said to every person who had been baptized by John in the Jordan, "You are my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased" and that Jesus was the only one who believed him? My father-in-law used to say

that accepting the fact that we are accepted by God is one of the hardest things for us as Christians, or, as he put it, “accepting our acceptance.” Most of us can’t imagine God whispering in our ears while we are praying, “You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.” We know ourselves to be sinners—miserable sinners—and if we imagine God whispering anything in our ears it is usually something other than that. But what if we could, what if we did? John Claypool once said that if we could hear God calling us beloved, and if we could believe that it was true, it would change our lives forever.

I remember seeing a picture in *National Geographic* years ago of a man being baptized in the Jordan River. It was at that place just downstream from the Sea of Galilee where they used to take all the tourists, miles away from the place where Jesus was actually baptized but the Jordan River all the same. I’m not sure when the National Geographic picture was taken but it shows a young, bearded man coming up out of the water. He looks to be about thirty years old. His robe is translucent, and through it you can see big, orange letters on his green T-shirt spelling out the word “Tennessee.” His arms are raised, his head is lifted up, and his eyes appear to be fixed on something no one else can see. Is it a dove, fluttering down from the sky to rest upon him? The caption beside the picture identifies him as Jerry Yother, a nuclear technician and an ordained minister from Chattanooga. “I can tell you exactly what I was thinking here,” he said. “I’m hearing God say, ‘This is my son, Jerry, in whom I am well pleased.’”

It sounds a little arrogant, doesn’t it? A little self-righteous? We turn up our noses at that kind of thing. “Well, aren’t you special? Look everybody, it’s Jerry Yother from Tennessee, the beloved son of God!” But I keep coming back to John Claypool’s statement: that if we could hear God saying that to us, and if we could believe that it was true, it would change our lives forever.

Over the Christmas holiday my family and I traveled to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to spend some time with my wife's sister. We hadn't been together in a while and it took some time to warm up to each other again. One of my nieces seemed particularly withdrawn. When I walked into the house she wouldn't even say hello to me. But after supper that night I heard her say to her grandmother, "I'm your favorite, right?" She said it in a teasing way, but you could almost hear beneath her words the longing for acceptance. "I'm your favorite, *right?*" "Well, of course you are!" her grandmother said, and then everyone got in on it. In the days that followed I heard my sister-in-law say, "How's my favorite daughter?" I heard her siblings say, "Look! It's our favorite sister!" And I said to her, privately, "You know, you really are my favorite." It was just a big game. We were all playing along. But then I noticed how it was affecting my niece, how she stood up a little straighter, entered into conversation more easily, began to laugh. By the end of our time together she was the life of the party. If I had to guess I would say that all our playful favoritism had an effect on her, and that, if it didn't change her life forever, it at least changed her life for those few days. You know as well as I do what power words can have over a person. Think what a difference it makes to hear someone say, "I love you. I'm crazy about you. You're my favorite!" And then think what a difference it would make in your life, now and forever, to hear God say, "You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."

Shhhh. If you're quiet enough you might just be able to hear it,
That whispered voice,
speaking words of acceptance and affirmation,
for your ears only.

