



SAINT LUKE'S

"AWAKENING TO OUR BELOVEDNESS"

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD
YEAR B

GENESIS 1:1-5

PSALM 29

ACTS 19:1-7

MARK 1:4-11

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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There is so much to be concerned about as we begin this new year. The North Korea situation; Cyber-attacks: Spectre, Meltdown. Oil Drilling in all US waters. National parks rollback. One of the lessons of history is that there has always been a lot to be anxious about. Baptism into the Christian faith is not a magic antidote. What baptism into Christ offers is the firmest possible foundation for a human life.

When John baptizes Jesus, Jesus is about 30 years old.¹ Yet we baptize children as well as adults because Jesus shows us that God's love is unconditional. God loves each of us as we are, not only when we behave well or give intellectual assent to certain doctrines. God loves each of us no matter what choices we make in the future. We baptize children because children are fully welcome into God's beloved community. If we had to delay baptism until full understanding or some other standard of perfection was reached, none of us would ever be ready for baptism! Baptism is an unconditional gift of love from God. Why wouldn't we baptize children?

For many years I think I only half-understood Jesus' baptism. I thought of it almost as Jesus' graduation moment; as Jesus being handed his identity papers, his earthly assignment. Yet what we are told is that Jesus becomes aware of his own belovedness. Through water and the Holy Spirit, Jesus is shown how God has felt about him all along: *You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.* Jesus awakens to his blessedness, his belovedness. As Jesus' whole being is flooded in this spiritual awakening, Jesus starts to see this belovedness everywhere.

¹ Luke 3:23

When we say something is holy, or blessed, we mean God is in it. Much of Jesus' ministry is releasing blessings – releasing God's healing, restoring wholeness and justice and community, freeing those imprisoned by illness or isolation. Jesus sees blessings and belovedness in the most unlikely situations and people (*blessed are...*the poor, the persecuted, the sorrowful)². Once Jesus awakens to being beloved by God and delighting God, Jesus sees God's beloved everywhere.

Jesus' baptism helps us awaken to *our* belovedness. We too are beloved children of God. Not in competition and rivalry like the two brothers in the Prodigal Son story,³ not like Cain and Abel competing to the death;⁴ with God there is ample love and to spare for each one of us. Can we take on the Epiphany eyes Jesus has, seeing God in everyone and everywhere?

God knows that this is not easy. This is why throughout Jesus' own life, and throughout *our* lives today, Jesus leads us from inside the world we know. From cradle to the grave, Jesus goes through what we go through. Jesus shows us the way by doing it himself. Like this, he says, as he enters the water; like this, Jesus says, washing the feet of his friends. Like this, Jesus says, stopping to listen. Like this, Jesus says, pausing to pay attention to social outcasts, prostitutes, children, tax collectors and collaborators; women doing household chores; foreigners who have no other advocate; lepers whom no-one will touch. Like this, Jesus says, giving another chance to a close friend who has denied him three times. Jesus doesn't stand apart from our human experience in any way. That

² eg. Matthew 5:1-11; Mark 10:16; Luke 1:42; 6:20f.; 14:14; 23:29; John 20:29

³ Luke 15:11ff.

⁴ Genesis 4:1ff.

would be the sin for Jesus - *refusing* to be baptized. Refusing to wash feet. The sin for Jesus would be saying that is fine for people like us, but not necessary for him.

Jesus does not separate himself from us. God already knows all about human life before Jesus is born, but in Jesus, God wants *us* to know that He knows what our lives are like; what pain, suffering, fear and anxiety are. In the midst of our complicated world, Jesus declares God is here now. Jesus is still here with us, in the water and anointing oil of baptism; in the Holy Spirit Who abides in us; in the everyday things God makes holy by living in them - bread, wine, Scriptures, each other.

Finally, we remember that baptism doesn't immunize or protect us from anything. We still sin and stumble, we still make destructive choices from fear and pride and greed. Jesus himself went straight from his baptism to be tempted by the Evil One. Even Jesus is not immune from hard choices and the lure of shiny gods and their empty promises. A Cherokee native American parable tells of two wolves within each of us. An old Cherokee chief is teaching his grandson about life. He says to his grandson: "A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf is evil - he is anger, jealousy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, lies, false pride, and ego. The other wolf is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, compassion, generosity, truth, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too." The grandson thinks about it for a minute and then asks his grandfather: "Which wolf will win?". The

grandfather replies: "The one you feed."

Which parts of our human nature do we feed each day? These are baptismal choices. Let us call upon Jesus to help us choose to feed the compassionate, justice-seeking kindness within us. Let us encourage each other to do the same. And let us be people of hope and light in this troubled world that God loves beyond measure.

AMEN

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