

Sermon 1-10-10<sup>1</sup>  
Galatians 3:25-29  
Luke 3:15-22  
*Baptized for Ministry*

Our Gospel reading for today opens with the ministry of John the Baptist. Now, I've always found John to be an interesting figure. There he is, living out in the wilderness near the Jordan River. I imagine that his beard is a little straggly, his hair is matted, and his eyes have a wild, yet passionate look to them. It makes you wonder how Elizabeth and Zechariah felt about this man, their son, whose ministry of preparing the way of the Lord took an interesting turn. Rather than following what was conventional, John took up the prophets mantle, calling people to repent and to submit to a baptism of repentance. And people flocked to him, according to Luke; they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" And so John taught the people essentially about repentance, what repentance looks like. He emphasized the reality of a transformed lifestyle and a new way of living. And the crowds began to wonder, "Is this the one who was promised to us?"

As Luke tells us, "The people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the messiah. John answered them all saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one

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who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap 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 barn; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod, the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting John in prison.

“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.” This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Would you pray with me please?

No matter what side you were on, no one can deny that the election season in 2008 was a passionate, emotionally charged affair. All across this country, political fervor was mixed with emotional turmoil, which in turn ignited a swirling, personally charged atmosphere wherever you went. People were passionate on both sides concerning the myriad of events going on. While the circumstances might be different, the emotional,

political, and personal expectations were there in the ancient world as well. People in Judea were waiting for someone to step into the void of real leadership in the hopes that that person would take over Herod's throne and banish the Roman presence from God's land. As we listen to Luke's Gospel, you can almost hear the crowd clamoring, "Will the real messiah please stand up?"

John was already in the business of preaching, teaching, and baptizing, so one would think that he was the guy. But from John's own testimony, he is not. John points to the one who is coming after him, to the one who is more powerful than he is. And going from John's testimony we skip ahead to Luke's abrupt detail about the baptism of Jesus. It is important to note that Luke does not describe the baptism. He takes it as an event that happened with all those other people who were being baptized. While Matthew and Mark's gospels highlight the event, going so far as to narrate the discussion between Jesus and John, Luke simply lumps Jesus in with the rest of those who seek John's baptism. And we can't help wondering, "Why does Jesus need to be baptized in the first place?"

It's an odd thing to contemplate, to be sure. If Jesus is the Son of God, then why does he submit himself to a baptism of repentance? If Jesus is

supposed to be sinless, why does he go through a ritual act that cleanses people of their sins? Is it merely for show, or is what we believe about Jesus wrong, or is there something deeper going on here? When coming to a passage like this, we must be aware of the larger context of Jesus' ministry. This is not just the local carpenters' son who happened to wander down to the Jordan River to be baptized. This is the one whose birth was announced to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. This is the one whose ministry is about salvation, whose mission is about reclaiming people from the clutches of sin and death. This is the one whose ministry has to start somewhere, and he chose to begin with the dregs of society. In Luke's Gospel, we see Jesus lining up with all the other sinners, he gets in line with all those who have been bruised and battered by the wear and tear of day-to-day living. He gets in line with the sin-sick and weary people, people like you and me when we're honest, and he goes through what they go through. What we discover in Luke is that Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River is a vicarious act that kicks off his ministry. Jesus freely submits to a baptism of repentance, that he might vicariously join in with the sin-sick, making their situation his own.

When we think about the baptism of Jesus, we're forced to remember that this is not just any other person who gets in line with everyone else, this is the Lord God Almighty who penetrates into the depths of our brokenness and our sin-sickness in, through, and as Jesus Christ; who gets in line with the rest of the people to show his solidarity with them, to vicariously stand in for them, and to bend back the sinful will of humanity for the purposes of God. God doesn't come to us as a standoffish king, he comes as God-for-us in the form of a servant; the lowest of low that there can be. And without saying a single word out loud in the midst of his baptism, Jesus takes a moment to pray. After showing his solidarity with those who are trapped in the clutches of sin and death, after becoming sin for us though he knew no sin, Jesus takes a moment to pray – and that's when the really cool stuff happens.

The really cool stuff doesn't happen when Jesus is baptized, at least according to Luke. No, the incredible happens afterwards when Jesus begins to pray. There, in that moment of communion with his Father in heaven, we hear that his ministry, right from the beginning, is more than one man doing an incredible thing: his ministry is the ministry of God himself in the midst of the world. Gone are the days when God sends prophets and

priests to do his work, now God takes up the work of ministry himself; God takes on the mission and ministry of redemption and reconciliation. All of this we hear in those glorious words, “This is my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” In that moment we discover the full scope of Jesus’ ministry: He is the mission of the Father to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God’s mission enfleshed who comes with a word of salvation and healing in his wings.

Now some of you may be wondering, “Tom, why are these liturgical seasons so important, why do you lay so much emphasis on Christ the King Sunday, or Epiphany, or Baptism of the Lord? Why can’t we just go about business as usual? Can’t you tell us something that might be a little more entertaining? What does the yearly celebration of the Lord’s Baptism have to do with our lives here at this moment?” Well, the short answer is: everything. We celebrate liturgical seasons in part to give us a rhythm to our lives in worship but they also serve the purpose of instructing us and guiding us through our Christian lives. For us today, the celebration of the baptism of Jesus should call to mind our own baptisms; reminding us who we are and what we have been set apart to do.

As John Calvin notes, Jesus “received the same baptism with us, in order to assure believers, that they are ingrafted into his body, and that they are ‘buried with him in baptism,’ that they may rise to ‘newness of life,’ (Rom. 4.4)...The general reason why Christ received baptism was, that he might render full obedience to the Father; and the special reason was, that he might consecrate baptism in his own body, that we might have it in common with him (John Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 202).”

Sometimes we forget the full importance of baptism and its impact upon each one of our lives. We forget that just as Jesus was baptized for ministry as the mission of the Father to the world, we too are baptized for ministry; baptized to participate in the resurrected ministry of our savior in this place.

In our culture, baptism has become a rite of passage rather than a glorious declaration that we are claimed by God and adopted as God’s own children in Christ. We operate with this “insurance policy” vision of baptism more than anything else. And so we must reclaim and remember the biblical and classical understanding that baptism is truly a dying with Christ to sin in those waters so that we are raised up in the newness of life with Jesus; claimed as one of God’s own because we have been so joined in union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. In looking to Jesus’ baptism, we

learn that it is a baptism on our behalf, a vicarious act that assures us that we really and truly are a part of his living, reigning, active, and present life; that in our baptisms we have a gracious Father who love us. The good news of great joy sealed up within our baptismal identity is the knowledge that we know who we are and who we belong to. Moreover, as Jesus was baptized for ministry, we are reminded that we are as well.

I invite you, as you leave today past the baptismal font, to recall your own baptisms. Whether as a child or an adult, it makes no difference. Remember your baptism; remember who you are God's own. Remember that for us and our salvation Jesus himself was baptized, so that he might fully identify himself with us, assuring us that nothing of who we are is foreign to him, there is no deep dark secret no sin that is unknown to him because we are joined to his saving life and that we would have no doubts about his power in our lives. And finally, remember that you too have been baptized for ministry. Joined in union with our blessed savior through the power of the Holy Spirit you are baptized for a life of ministry, whatever that may look like in your own journey with Jesus. Crossing through those doors, you enter the mission field baptized for ministry and invited to get in on what Jesus is doing out of the freedom of his love in the power of the Spirit. It

makes not difference who you are or what you think of yourself; God has claimed you in the waters of baptism, and pledges his faithfulness to us in the life of his beloved Son. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.