

## A VISION AND A VOICE

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus. Whether you are a long-time church member or you are seeking to discover more about Christianity, most folks have heard the word "Baptism." Some people refer to the event as "christening." Regardless of the word used, it is associated with a special church ritual.

There is much about baptism that is worth thinking about. We follow certain procedures to prepare for it. There are conversations with the pastor. A date is set when family and friends can be present at the service. There is a class to attend about the meaning of baptism.

On the day of the baptism, there is an air of excitement. The parents of the baby are frequently nervous that their child will be too noisy during the baptism. The godparents are proud to have been asked to be sponsors. The grandparents beam proudly from the second pew and take lots of pictures after the service. Of course, there is the baby, or the child, or the adult who is the center of attention.

Important words are said during the baptismal service. "Do you promise to fulfill these obligations?" "We do!" "Do you believe in God the Father?" "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We welcome you into the Lord's family..." There are also significant actions that are part of a baptism: the splashing of water; the sign of the cross. No matter how many baptisms we have, each one is a special occasion. Not even the most loudly crying baby can mar the event. You would think that is how the Bible would have described Jesus' baptism. As important as baptism is and as important as Jesus is, you would think his baptism would have been rich with religious ceremony. However Mark devotes only three short verses to it. No mention about the words said or the promises made. No mention about sponsors. No sign of the cross. Only a vision and a voice!

The vision was of opening heavens. But wait! There is no mention of golden shafts of light zeroing in on Jesus! There was only the appearance of a bird--- a simple dove at that. And then, the voice: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Of course, John the Baptist did not have the Book of Worship to use at Jesus' baptism. Nor was Jesus dressed in a white robe that had been worn by his parents at their baptisms. But when all is said and done, that voice and that dove tell the real story of what baptism is all about.

A vision and a voice! "Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens open up and God's Spirit descended like a dove on him." The only time in the entire Bible that God's Spirit is identified with a dove is at the baptism of Jesus. Yet for over 2000 years the descending dove has been the church's most widely used symbol of God's Holy Spirit. That tells us something about the importance of its appearance at Jesus' baptism.

What was the vision? It was a vision of God's very own presence! It was a vision of the immediacy of God's Spirit. The dove's appearance said in no uncertain terms that God's Spirit was right there in the middle of that event!

The liturgy does not call for the use of live doves at a baptism (maybe it should). But what is important is that God's Spirit is equally present today as parents, sponsors, and the person being baptized gather around the baptismal font. Baptism is far more than a nice religious ritual we conduct for children. It is an occasion when God's Spirit is right here among us! Baptism is called a "Sacrament." Martin Luther described a sacrament as a "visible sign of God's invisible grace and love."

"A visible sign." Whether it is a baby who is presented by parents and sponsors, or whether it is older children and adults who are presenting themselves to be baptized, the living God is in the middle of the people gathered here. How do I know? Because God has promised to be here just like God was present at Jesus' baptism.

Then there's the voice. The words of the voice echoed the Old Testament Servant Song of Isaiah 42 which told of the mission and purpose of the life of the one to whom they were spoken: "I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." It is no easy task to bring forth justice in the world, or to work for an end to human suffering, or to bring peace where there is hatred and discord. And yet, that is the mission which is laid upon every person who is washed in the waters of baptism.

Justice does not happen naturally. Peace is elusive when the conflict of human wills is involved. Human suffering is easier to ignore because of its painfulness. But those are the arenas of life to which Jesus was sent. And because of our baptism, those are the arenas of life to which we are sent—to do something about them! We are to bring about healing, reconciliation, and change. We are to bring an end to injustice and oppression. We are to care for the hungry and homeless. We are to work to make peace a reality.

It takes a special power to face those kinds of issues. But the voice throws us back to the vision—for the power of the vision is the power of God's very own Spirit. We are not left to our own devices to do justice for God. We are given the power of God which comes from the Spirit of God! Are we good enough for the task? Are we capable enough for the task? Has God given us a mission that is beyond us? Listen to the voice again: "You are my son...you are my daughter. With you I am pleased!" I find that astounding. God is saying that he accepts us just the way we are—at a time when we are small, helpless, and crying—at a time when we cannot even say God's name—at a time when we don't even know any theology about God. What's more, God tells us that once the waters of baptism have flowed over our heads, it's good for life! What a magnificent graciousness for God to make such a promise to us right at the start before we've even had the chance to botch things up!

Unfortunately, this is where Christians begin to quibble among themselves. Some say we've got to be old enough to understand what we're doing before the promise can be given to us. Others say that we can lose the promise if we don't stay on the straight and narrow.

Folks, such arguments put the focus in the wrong place. I am convinced that when we come face-to-face with a love that accepts us the way we are with no strings whatsoever attached; we cannot help but respond with the kind of gratitude which seeks to accomplish the mission which this gracious God wants us to do. "You are my son. You are my daughter. With you I am pleased."

Baptism is not some kind of "Magic spell" or "death insurance" policy that we take out on little children. Baptism is about life, because baptism is an entrance into the life of Jesus Christ and into the life of Christ's church. Whether we are baptized as an infant or as an adult, in baptism we are marked as belonging to God. We baptize young children, not because we are afraid a child will die. We baptize them because we want them to live in the company of God's people where they grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.

This morning I have asked you to remember the vision and the voice at Jesus' baptism, because it is the same voice that was present at your baptism, or will be present on the day you will be baptized. Always remember the words and actions which are part of that day: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on this person; the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence." Remember the sign of the cross made upon your forehead with the words: "Child of God, today you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross forever!"