

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
January 12, 2025 – The Baptism of our Lord  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Last Sunday when we celebrated Epiphany, I spoke about the gifts brought to the infant Jesus by the magi, the three Wise Men. The gifts they gave were suitable to honor a king or a deity. Gold represented Jesus' kingship. Frankincense was a symbol of his priestly role as well as his deity. Myrrh prefigured his death and embalming. From the time the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear God's Son and through all the events surrounding Jesus' birth, the gospel writers make it clear that this child was unlike others, that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was both God and man.

In scripture we are told very little about Jesus' life from his birth until he began his ministry at the age of 30. Luke's Gospel records his circumcision eight days after his birth. Then nothing until he was 12 years old when he went with his parents to Jerusalem to observe Passover. Instead of joining his parents and other friends and relatives on the return trip, Jesus stayed behind in the temple to question and learn from the teachers there. Then nothing is recorded by Luke until the episode we just heard. Luke's Gospel only states that "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40).

This morning we meet John the Baptist. Actually, in a sense, we have met him before, when he was in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. She was a kinswoman of Mary, the mother of Jesus. After the angel's announcement to her, Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and when she arrived, the child, John, leapt in Elizabeth's womb. "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry" to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:41-42).

John grew up and became a great prophet who announced to the Jews the coming of the Messiah and who preached repentance. He baptized people in the river Jordan as a sign of repentance, of being washed clean from sin to begin a new and holier life. He has become known to us as John the Baptist because he baptized many people who repented and because he baptized Jesus. John was a charismatic character who had a large following of disciples. In fact, as we just heard, many people wondered if he was the Messiah who had been foretold. But John consistently denied that role. He always pointed to Jesus and made clear where he stood in relation to Jesus. "One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals" – a job that was done by the lowest of household servants.

After being baptized in water by John, Jesus was praying and "the heaven was opened." In scripture this phrase indicates a direct revelation from God. Luke wants us to understand that the people present at Jesus' baptism witnessed God's direct revelation. The people saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus "in bodily form like a dove." "Like a dove" is a rather vague description. Clearer than the visual experience was what the people heard, the voice of God saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These words are very similar to those heard at another memorable event in the life of Jesus, the Transfiguration, when for a short while the radiant light of Christ was visible to his disciples and God's voice was heard to say, "This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!" The New Testament record is clear. Jesus is the beloved Son of God, and we are meant to listen to his teaching.

After the account of Jesus' baptism Luke writes that "Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his work" (Luke 3:23) and that work began with his forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil – something we will be hearing more about in weeks to come.

When I read this account of Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry, I always think to myself, what must it have been like for Jesus to hear God say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." What must it have been like to have that assurance before enduring those forty days in the wilderness? What must it have been like for Jesus to hear God's voice again at the Transfiguration, when his divine nature was temporarily revealed and when he spoke with Moses and Elijah about the suffering and death he was about to undergo in Jerusalem? (Luke 9:28-31) "This is my Son, my Beloved." Imagine what strength these words must have given Jesus.

In Advent and in the Christmas season we focus on the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. God made man. God with us. Emmanuel. God who shared in human life in the person of Jesus. God who knows "from the inside," as it were, all about human nature, human joys and human sorrows, human failings and human faithfulness. The beloved Son of God who teaches, heals, forgives, and saves.

Our experiences of others, from the time we are born and all through our lives, affect our relationships with God. In many conversations with Christian people over the years, I have come to understand that people who have grown up with parents, grandparents, or other caregivers who have shown them love which is steadfast and virtually unshakeable are often able to know and experience God's love. The good people in their lives – though flawed as all human beings are – have provided a foundation for an understanding of God's love that is very real. That foundation strengthens them and helps them endure the hardships and heartbreaks of life. Of course, not everyone is blessed with such a foundation. Feeling God's love can be very difficult for people who have not experienced a solid foundation of human love.

But in the church we affirm that God offers God's love to everyone. In Advent I quoted these words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable."

This is what we believe about every person, every child of God. Our faith in God's love can sustain us when we endure the trials and sufferings of life, which is a great blessing. Our faith in God's love for every person can also guide us as we decide how to live our lives and how to evaluate human behavior. The Holy Spirit present at Christ's baptism continues to be a living presence in people's lives, at work in many ways. The Spirit is the "Spirit of truth" that leads us to know and confess Christ as our Lord. The Spirit brings us peace, the peace of Christ that passes understanding. The Spirit helps us to pray – to praise God, to pray on behalf of others, to bare our souls to the Lord. The Spirit gives us assurance that we are the beloved children of God, that we belong to God and that nothing can separate us from God. The Spirit gives us strength and comfort, enabling us to bear our burdens and to share the burdens of others. The Spirit leads us to keep the commandments of God, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. It is through the Holy Spirit that we have faith in Christ and through the Holy Spirit that we grow into the likeness of Christ. The Holy Spirit is powerful because it is God at work.

May the Holy Spirit help us to know God's love for us and for all people and may we follow where the Spirit leads us, now and always. In the name of Christ, our Savior. Amen.