

First Presbyterian Allegan MI. 1/13/2013.

Acts 10:34-43 <sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. <sup>36</sup> You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup> You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

<sup>39</sup> "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup> but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. <sup>41</sup> He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Luke 3:15-22

<sup>15</sup> The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, "I baptize you with <sup>[c]</sup> water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." <sup>18</sup> And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

<sup>19</sup> But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, <sup>20</sup> Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

<sup>21</sup> When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Today we find ourselves at the beginning of something. The twelve days of Christmas ended last week with our celebration of Epiphany. We talked about what it meant that the wise men, or Magi came and bowed down to the Christ Child. But after the Magi leave, the documentation as to what happened next to Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus gets kind of thin. We actually know very little about Jesus' childhood. We have only one infancy story about how Joseph and Mary fled with their infant son to Egypt to get away from the murdering King Herod, and we have a childhood story about how Jesus remained behind in the temple when he was about twelve years old. The other stories about Jesus childhood that are found in some "Missing books of the Bible" were written much later and were an attempt to fill in the big gap that we have of those missing childhood years.

The gospel instead really pick up the account of Jesus with stories about Jesus when he is at the beginning of his ministry. And all of the Biblical accounts of Jesus ministry begin right here with the story of Jesus baptism. While the different gospel accounts all include their own unique details about the baptism of Jesus, they are all in agreement about this event and in the major sequence of the events in the baptism of Jesus.

They all include three things. First, the heavens being opened, second, the Holy Spirit coming down like a dove, and the voice of God declaring that Jesus was God's beloved Son, with whom God is very pleased! We will begin today with the last part. On this the gospels are in agreement: God, in God's own voice declared to the world the identity of Jesus. This is who Jesus was, and this identity was no longer a secret. Jesus was God come to Earth! Jesus was God's Son, belonging to and bearing God's presence to earth.

Our daughter Elisa was born on Christmas morning 12 years ago. In Holland hospital very quickly after her premature birth, they put a plastic identification bracelets on one of her tiny wrists as well as a matching one on my wrist. --We still have those hospital bracelets and use them as Christmas tree ornaments. The hospital personnel were not only concerned with giving both of us the treatment that we needed, they also needed to make sure that they knew who they were giving treatment to. -- Who Elisa was, and who she belonged to was information that was just as important as the fact that she weighed only 4lbs 4oz and was 16" long.

Now in the first century, when infants were born, they did not issue them plastic identification wrist bands. People did not carry drivers licenses

as identification either. The way that people verified their identity was by having other people attest as to who they were. And that is exactly what is going on here. God is telling the world something important about Jesus -- THIS is my CHILD. My Son, and before he has done anything at all in his ministry, before Jesus heals one sick child or before Jesus feeds one hungry person, God tells the world that God is very well pleased with him. It is actually a very wonderful and amazing through. God's love and approval of us is not based on any of the good works that we do, it is simply based on our desire to be faithful, our very first step in publically saying, "Yes" to God and to God's love.

The first thing to remember about baptism, is that it is a verification of our identity. By participating in this sacrament, we acknowledge that we all are CHILDREN of God: Young or old, big or small, gay or straight, black or white, boys or girls. It doesn't matter who we are, it matters WHOSE we are. Whether people know it or not, whether they acknowledge it or not, even people who do not believe in God are still God's children. Wayward and headstrong though they may be. But when we are baptized, when we stretch out our hearts to connect with God, God smiles and says, "YES! This is my beloved child! This one is my beloved son, my beloved

daughter. And I am so very proud and so very pleased that they exist and that they can love and be in a relationship with me!"

But wait a minute Pastor Karen, you say. Where did this practice of Baptism come from? Those who are unfamiliar with Old Testament Jewish traditions, may say that there was no practice of dunking someone in a river to indicate that God had forgiven their sins and that God was claiming them as God's own child. But scholars who study Jewish tradition do see a huge connection between the Jewish cleansing rituals that were performed in the mikvah and the ritual of Baptism that John the Baptizer was utilizing. The mikvah was the ritual cleansing that was accomplished by immersing oneself in running water. Before the High Priest entered into the holy of holies in the temple, in preparation to celebrate the Jewish high holy days, and also after a woman menstruated, the Old Testament purity laws in Leviticus required that the Hebrew people had to immerse themselves in a Mikvah bath. In modern Jewish communities, Mikvah baths, small pools really are still being constructed and used. The rules and regulations for them require the use of rainwater or running river water as well as completely showering and cleansing oneself before entering the chest high waters. Instead of being a physically cleansing experience, the Mikvah is

viewed as a method of spiritual cleansing. It is a way of removing all of the guilt and sin that separates a person from God. It is a way to purify the soul in the presence of the Holy.

And that is indeed what is going on here. The second thing to remember about Baptism is that in all of the gospel accounts of Jesus baptism, it speaks of the heavens being opened up. With the first century view of the earth separated from heaven by a firmament or a retaining force, the explanation of that firmament cracking or separating enough to allow heaven to come down to the earthly world below was a description of a spiritual and real connection of God to people. And for God to reach down and to connect with humanity, for God who was holy to be able to connect with humans who were not holy, required some faithful action on a humans part to cleanse their soul.

I am not sure about you, but there are many instances where I have felt like the presence of the Holy has come down to earth. There have been times in worship services when the sense of God's love is so real that you can almost see it in addition to feel it. There have also been times when I have been out in nature, and the presence of God's holiness seems to be tangible. It could be in the shape of a lone tree in the middle of field,

stretching it's branches far up into the heavens, or in the small quiet gurgle of a creek as it makes it's way across stones and sticks to rush far away on its crazy meandering journey. Authors have described these places as "Thin Places" --places where it feels that the presence of God is more accessible to humans. Places where it feels like your thirsty soul drinks up the presence of God like a tall class of cool water.

The third and final thing to remember about Baptism is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Of the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit seems to be the one that most mysterious and least discussed. In fact, the trinity has been famously described by one lifelong church member somewhere as "Two men and a Bird". And it is right here, in this story of Jesus' baptism, that we get the image of the Holy Spirit, physically descending, and setting just like a dove upon Jesus.

On the back brick wall of the small Baptist Church that I was raised in, there are some big symbols that were made by a creative Oakridge Baptist member out of sheets of plywood and painted brown. On the left side on that back wall, there is a large brown wooden cup to symbolize the wine of communion. On the right side on the back wall, there is a large brown loaf of bread to symbolize the bread for our sacrament of

communion. But right in the middle between the cup and the bread was a huge brown silhouette of a dive bombing bird. The bird was positioned so that it was right over the back doors of the sanctuary, flying downward as if though it was about to collide with the poor soul who would happen to wander through the doors at the wrong moment. The bird probably isn't as big as I remember it, but to the eyes of a small child, that bird was huge and her flying down in attack mode toward me was not a comforting thought.

In contrast to my childhood worries about an attacking brown plywood bird, the Holy Spirit came from heaven downward to rest on Jesus, just as naturally and as easily as a bird flies down and settles on a branch. Like the gentle and peaceful dove comes and settles down on her nest, the Holy Spirit came and abided with even Jesus at the time of his baptism. Even Jesus, God's son, the one who had a miraculous conception, the one who had reknown Magi worshipping him had the presence of God's Holy Spirit come and fill him before he began his ministry.

So what does all of this mean for us today? The first thing to remember is that in our Baptism, we are recognizing that we are indeed a child of God. We have an identity that no human can destroy and that

nothing can ever take away. God loves us and wants to be in a relationship with us, even if we deny that God exists, even if we run to the furthest corners of the earth while living our own self obsessive lives. In Baptism, it is a chance for us to say, "We are God's" and for God to grin back at us and joyfully say, "YOU! YOU are MY CHILD. And I love you and am so proud of you!"

The second thing to keep in mind is that during Jesus baptism, the veil that separates humans from the holy was cracked open; and the presence of God was able to fill that moment and that place. In a similar way, we as God's people need to be intentional to seek out and even to create opportunities to experience these thin places where we feel the presence of God.

And finally we come to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit not only came and filled Jesus, but the presence of the Spirit is in each of us. The Holy Spirit of God gives us the power to follow God's will to act on those impulses of love that God places in our hearts. As the people of God, we are never alone, but we walk with God with us, both in the good days and the bad days, on the days we feel fantastic and the days we feel miserable. May we all be open to the presence of the Holy Spirit empowering us. Amen.