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Epiphany 1C
Peace, Seattle
January 10, 2010 epk
Luke 3:15-22, Isaiah 43:1-7

BELOVED

Baptism is one of my favorite topics, and I'm so pleased that as we mark the baptism of Jesus today we will be welcoming Liana and Levon to the body of Christ through this sacrament.

There are three things I'd like to pay special attention to in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism.
The first two have to do with where Luke places the accents in his story of the baptism;
And the third has to do with what comes immediately after it.

First, after Jesus' baptism, Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus "in bodily form like a dove."

Luke's is the only gospel to include the words "IN BODILY FORM." WHY?
It serves, in a way, as a kind of preview of coming attractions.

Luke is putting us on notice that the Jesus he's telling us about is less interested in high spiritual concepts and much more interested in real world evidence that GOD IS INDEED WITH US. That Jesus is the one in whom God's agenda for the world, becomes very concrete; it's the rubber that hits the road; the all-terrain wheel that takes the son of God to the margins where the last, the lost, and the least live out their lives in the underside of history; and where, in the ministry of Jesus, the last become first.

Think of the parables and stories that only Luke tells:
- Lost sheep
- Prodigal son
- Good Samaritan
- Poor man Lazarus
- Zacchaeus

Think of how women have stronger roles in Luke than in the other gospels.
And how it is those who are physically impoverished—rather than the "poor in spirit"—who discover their blessed status before God.

The Jesus Luke wants to tell us about is one who reaches to touch and heal physical burdens, not just psychic or spiritual ones; and who commands his followers: GO AND DO LIKEWISE.

The second feature in the story I want to point out this morning is THE VOICE, which addresses not the crowd gathered there at the Jordan, but Jesus himself with the words:
YOU ARE MY SON, THE BELOVED; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.

The affirmation is direct, it's personal, and it's powerful.
I BELIEVE IN YOU! God says.

Some of us grew up with loving fathers who knew how to declare and show their love for us.

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Some of us grew up with fathers who we suspected loved us, but who kept us guessing because they could never quite form the words and get them to come out of their mouths.

And some of us are still waiting for words that express love from our fathers—and not just words but actions that make those words real.

When a legacy of an abusive relationship casts shadows over our life, we long to know that there is at least one relationship in our lives that is secure and inviolate.

The psalmist testifies to a God whose thunderous voice "shakes the wilderness" and "strips the forest bare." [Psalm 29:8, 9] But hear at Christ's baptism, the voice of the Almighty God becomes the voice of the All-tender God; a voice filled not with consternation but with affirmation.

Today Jesus heavenly Father declares his love directly, personally, and powerfully—not for the sake of the crowd gathered at the river, but for the sake of Jesus himself:

YOU'RE MY SON, AND I LOVE YOU.

We hear a lot from the prophet Isaiah about this time of year.
Isaiah spoke God's word among his people in exile. Israel had been defeated by the world superpower of that time—the Babylonians—and its people had been forcibly separated from everything that gave them meaning.

After so many years of being away, some exiles had forgotten what home was like. And some of them had given up on God, too—figuring he'd forgotten about them and given up on his people.

But then out of that desolate history comes this VOICE—strong and powerful—daring to suggest to the people that God had neither abandoned nor forgotten them:

THUS SAYS THE LORD WHO CREATED YOU AND FORMED YOU:
DO NOT FEAR, FOR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU;
I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, YOU ARE MINE!
WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I WILL BE WITH YOU,
AND THROUGH THE RIVERS, THEY WILL NOT OVERWHELM YOU…
YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT AND I LOVE YOU.

Bend your ear when Liana and Levon are baptized today and Amy, their mother, affirms her faith alongside them, and you'll hear that same VOICE speaking, affirming,

YOU ARE MY BELOVED DAUGHTERS, BELOVED SON!
I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, YOU ARE MINE!
YOU ARE PRECIOUS TO ME AND I LOVE YOU!

The third thing I want to say about Luke's story is to point out what comes immediately after Jesus' baptism.

Luke doesn't follow Jesus' baptism with a plunge into the wilderness temptation story, like we find in Mark and Matthew. Instead (get this!) we get a tracing of Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Adam.[1] Start unpacking the faith stories behind each generation and you can't escape the tragic conclusion of our failed human history.

[1] I am indebted to insights of Carol Lakey Hess in *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 1.* (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 237-238.

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What is Luke getting at? **There is a tragic structure to the human situation and Jesus, knowing this, enters into it.**

This is why, in spite of the fact that Luke spends more time than another other gospel writer showing us the sacredness of Jesus' birth and early life, Jesus submits himself to a baptism of repentance. **His baptism tells us he understands the full implications of the incarnation.** He is not merely identifying with or showing solidarity with the human world; he is acknowledging fully its tragic structure, a structure which is part of each of our lives no matter how new we are to this world.[2]

There are no innocent, unambiguous, sinless choices in this world. It doesn't take much living to discover this! **Jesus knows this,** he knows his ministry will have to confront and contend with that reality. And he also knows this is true about our lives, too.

When God in Christ calls us to the font, calls us to wade in the water, we meet him there as naked as the day we were born, for there are no secrets from him.

He knows all about us, knows our family histories, knows our failures, knows the details of our personal battles, our wildernesses, our exiles.

And most importantly, he knows where true life, redeemed life, whole life, is to be found. And through these waters he calls us to come and be washed clean, and to hear once more, or for the first time, THE VOICE which he himself once heard echoing from the heavens:

YOU ARE MY CHILD, MY BELOVED, WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.

Amen.

[2] Ibid.