

Psalm 29
 Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Second Sunday of Christmas
 Midway Presbyterian Church
 January 9, 2022

A Voice from Heaven

Introduction to the Psalm

The accounts of Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan River report that a heavenly voice spoke on the occasion. Our psalm today speaks of waters and a heavenly voice. Listen to these words from Psalm 29...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

This Sunday is designated Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It's the first Sunday of Epiphany. And our Gospel Lesson leaps forward from the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus to his baptism as a 33-year-old adult. Listen to these words from Luke 3:15-17, and 21-22...

Sermon

Though not as much in vogue today, a basic sermon model is Three Points and a poem. And that model will provide the structure of today's sermon as we reflect on Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus. The first point is about God's love.

The Reverend Teri McDowell Ott, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, offers this:

My children's need for love astounds me. When they were younger, I would lie down next to them in bed after tucking them in for the night. We'd take each other in our arms and talk about the day, saying things reserved for whispered conversations in the moonlight. My son liked me to rub his back and sing "his song"—a simple tune I made up when he was a baby. My daughter wanted to dream about her future, about the horse barn she would one day own and all the animals she will care for there. When I would eventually move to pull away from my children...[they] wanted more....Even a child who is well-loved is insatiably hungry for more.

In Luke's surprisingly brief account of Jesus' baptism, the words to be noted are God's, spoken from heaven as Jesus emerges from the water, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I

am well pleased.” These are blessed words of affirmation, love, and praise from Father to Son. Jesus comes from people much like those who gather with him at the river to be baptized. People who need to hear that they are loved, words of grace and encouragement. The words that Jesus receives from God at his baptism will sustain him in the wilderness of temptation, through his public ministry, his suffering, and his terrible death.

The message Jesus received in his baptism is the message for every person in line behind him. As John says:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
(John 3:16)

These words can sustain us too, but we also need parents, pastors, friends and loved ones to remind us that we are loved. It’s not unusual to overhear a phone conversation between husband and wife, or parent and child, end with, “Love you.” But too often, the world’s overwhelming message is that we are not good enough, not worthy, not deserving of love.

In our Gospel Lesson, we find Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan River. Yes, John, who felt unworthy even to untie his sandals. In his account of the baptism of Jesus, Luke provides a second point in emphasizing Jesus’ humanity and humility. Jesus was born in a stable in lowly Bethlehem to humble parents, a birth unannounced except to shepherds and foreigners. Instead of going to Jerusalem and identifying with the established religious leaders, Jesus gathered at the River Jordan with ordinary people who were being baptized. For Jesus didn’t separate himself from us and our humanity, but acted in solidarity with us. At his baptism, he identified with all the broken and hurting people who recognized their need of God. All the people who had about given up on themselves. Jesus got in line with us for baptism. But after he had been baptized, while Jesus was *praying*, something miraculous happened:

...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." (Luke 3:21b-22)

Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus does not have quite the display of majesty found in Psalm 29, where the voice of God thunders over the mighty waters, though it does have heaven opening, the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus like a dove, and the voice of God declaring his blessing upon Jesus at the quiet waters of the Jordan.

Furthermore, our lesson calls us to reflect on our own baptism and call to discipleship. In our baptism the same God who led his people out of Egyptian bondage through the waters of the Red Sea; the same God who instructed Moses to "strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink"; the same God whose glory was thundered in the storm; the same God who spoke his blessing upon our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ at his baptism in the Jordan River; the same God was present at our baptism claiming us a child of God, a sheep of his flock, a member of his Church.

And the same God is with us today. And will be with us tomorrow. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

No, being baptized does not prevent us from ever entering troubling waters. Some of our troubles we bring upon ourselves, some are brought upon us by others, while some just seem to come with the territory of living life. No, baptism does not make us immune to life's hardships. In fact, right after Jesus was baptized by John, he was immediately led into the wilderness where he was tempted to be someone other than who he was, to serve someone other than God. But there in

the wilderness Jesus would affirm the values by which he would live. His commitment to be the obedient Son of the Heavenly Father.

Our Psalm 29 was clearly intended to be used in worship—to bring honor to God, to declare his great glory, and to comfort his people. When we come together in worship, we hear again that amidst all the storms of life, God is present, engaging the chaos, opening the way of peace.

When we gather for worship, we share our journey of faith, drawing strength from one another, but even more from God. That cherished Psalm 23 presents the courage and faith of ordinary people just like you and me, who know want, who seek still waters, restoration of soul, paths of righteousness; even in the midst of a dark valley—even the valley of the shadow of death. And the God of the psalmist gives us courage to fear no evil, for he is with us. In the presence of enemies, a table of thanksgiving is prepared for us. God's goodness and mercy are assured, for all the days of our lives.

Grief, sickness, suffering, as well as joy and wonder, are all part of the life we live together. And yes, sometimes we feel overwhelmed at the losses, the sadness, and the separation. Overwhelmed with the fear and the pain and the suffering. And so week after week, we gather in worship, seeking confirmation that things will be well with our souls.

No, baptism is not an insurance policy against life's troubled waters, but it does seal our relationship with God, a relationship in which we are nourished, fed, and strengthened by faithfully availing ourselves of God's means of grace: the Word and the Sacraments. And the encouragement and help of a community of faith.

Our third and final point is found in Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a practitioner of prayer, one who often sought deserted places to pray. The prayer life of Jesus is evident in many of the

most significant events in his mission. At the baptismal scene, he is in prayer as the heavens open, the Spirit descends, and God proclaims him to be his beloved Son; his bodily transfiguration on a mountain; and following the Last Supper, his prayer on the Mount of Olives that “this cup may be removed, yet not my will, but yours.” Prayer also immediately precedes other special episodes: the appointment of the twelve disciples; his question to the disciples about his identity, when Peter confesses him as “God’s Messiah”; his teaching the disciples how to pray—in what we know as The Lord’s Prayer.

Prayer is also a feature of Jesus’ teaching. He tells a parable to emphasize the importance of praying continuously and another parable about the need for unpretentious prayer, prayer not to be seen by others, but in secret with God. He warns of scribes who “say long prayers.” In Luke’s Gospel, prayer is a central feature in Jesus’ life. So it’s no surprise that we find Jesus in prayer at his baptism.

For he will not undertake his public ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing in his own power and abilities. The source of his strength will be beyond himself. The Holy Spirit will encourage him all the way, even when the way becomes very difficult. Disciples learn this posture of prayer from Jesus, as the Spirit will give them the strength and patience to live and love in faithful ministry.

It is worth asking if we depend on God in prayer to deal wisely and effectively with all the challenges we face, for the spiritual wherewithal to go into the world and make a difference in people’s lives through Christ. This holy connection of prayer can be the lifeline of every disciple and every congregation.

Well, that’s the three points. God’s love for Jesus and for us. Jesus’ humanity and humility. And the prayer life of Jesus.

Now for that closing poem. In this case it's actually a prayer. James Weldon Johnson in "Listen, Lord—A Prayer," prays that we never forget to bend toward God for strength:

O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before Thy throne of grace.
O Lord—this morning—
Bow our hearts beneath our knees,
And our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning—
Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,
With no merits of our own.
O Lord—open up a window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen this morning.

(“Listen, Lord—A Prayer,” from *God’s Trombones*)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.