**“Working Title”**

January 12, 2025 1st Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Luke 3:1-3, 15-17, 21-22

Reed Baer West Parish of Barnstable

Introduction to Scripture

The scholars tell us that baptism was a custom practiced by some Jews at the time of Jesus, a sort of ritual cleansing accompanied by repentance, an indication by the ones being baptized that they wanted to turn away from their old life and make a fresh, clean start. Kinda like a New Year’s Resolution with water added.

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, the event which launches his ministry. He is now about thirty years old….

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, **2**during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3**He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins….

**15**As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, **16**John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17**His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

**21**Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, **22**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.”

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Before I begin, you may have noticed the typo in today’s order of worship, and you may be wondering about how it got there and who is responsible for it. I am referring, of course, to the title of today’s sermon.

Let me assure you that our top-notch office administrator, Susan McEwen, is not to blame for this apparent mistake – she just put in what I asked her to.

And yes, I will admit that when I sat down to write this sermon, while I did know the general direction that I wanted it to go in, I was at a complete loss when it came to typing out those words that go at the top of the blank paper. So, intending to get around to inserting a *real* title later, I just typed in the words, “working title.”

There is precedence for this, of course, for in the film industry a “working title” is the temporary title of a product or project used during its development. Often it is only when the project has been completed that it gets its official title.

But I am getting ahead of myself here, because this is a sermon about baptism, about the baptism of Jesus, and about our baptism.

Luke does not tell us why Jesus decided to be baptized, why he joined the throngs streaming out of Jerusalem and out to the wilderness, down to the river Jordan, why he appeared before the fiery prophet who greeted the crowds not with platitudes and words of comfort, but instead with “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!”

And yet, come he does, and with those crowds – with all that wave of humanity seeking a return to God, searching for a new start, longing for a new connection and new beginnings – with all humanity represented, Jesus goes down into the water and is baptized.

And it is then, in that moment, Jesus’ identity is made public. Luke describes how the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit, is incarnate in the form of something like a dove, and how it comes down upon Jesus at the same time as a voice comes from the heavens, saying “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus, this baptism proclaims, is intimately bound in relationship to God, a relationship marked by love, imbued with grace – for Jesus has yet to *do* anything, to even begin his ministry, and yet God proclaims God’s favor even so: “With you I am well pleased.”

The story of Jesus’ baptism reminds us of our own baptisms, and the promises our parents made for us when we were children, promises those of us who were confirmed made on our own years later, to follow in the way of Christ.

The great reformer Martin Luther wrote, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." I think Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day who we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are, in at least three ways.

First, I think that Luther wanted us to always remember that we are beloved, that we are precious beyond price in the eyes of our Creator.

This is your identity – no matter what the world may seem to tell you, you are a person of worth and value *just because*.

The bumper sticker reads, “God don’t make no trash”, and that is the Gospel truth, but beyond that, you are not just *not trash*, you are loved and valued beyond measure.

You know the value of such affirmation from a parent or a friend; I know I experienced it again this week, as on by birthday I received over 80 greetings on Facebook from those I have been privileged to know in grade school, college, law school, the ministry, sailing, and so on. And as class after class of Family School students trooped into the Pastor’s Study to sing me Happy Birthday and shower me with handcrafted birthday cards.

Affirmations such as these strengthen our identity, our will, our ability to act from that secure identity as one worthy and beloved.

And so, you may not have been the world’s best parent. You may fall short as a grandparent. Maybe you never set the world on fire in your career. Maybe you really screwed up your marriage. Maybe you have gone round and round and round again in a cycle of addiction. Maybe you even think that you are the best thing since sliced bread, so wrapped up in your own sense of wonderfulness that you can’t see the myriad of ways you fall short of the perfection you believe you need to show to the world to be accepted.

Even so, this is the meaning of your baptism: God loves you not just enough, but beyond more than enough. God says to you, “*You* are my *beloved*.”

Those words changed everything for Jesus – those words can and should change everything for you.

Second, I think Luther wanted us to remember that baptism is not just for us as individuals, but as a *community*. Just as Jesus’ baptism was a communal event, just as he went down into those water amid the crowds flocking to the wilderness, so too our baptism is in into community.

We are baptized into the church of Jesus Christ, a community of faith, and one that stretches far beyond our gathered fellowship here in West Barnstable.

We are baptized publically, a public announcement of our vows to follow Christ.

And we baptized are in this together, and in this together for the long haul. We each have our unique gifts and talents, we each bring something different to the table, and here, no one is dispensable. When one suffers, all suffer; when one rejoices, all share in that rejoicing.

We experience this all the time here. Like last Sunday, when one congregant consoled another, just worn out from the trials of caring for a spouse facing a myriad of health issues and countless medical appointments, reminding her that she needed, and deserved, some time to herself for healing and self-care. Like when our 8th graders cheer one another as they rejoice in making it through the lottery to attend their high school of choice.

Blest be the tie that binds us *together*, the love of God brought home to us through the sacrament of baptism.

Finally, I think that Luther wanted us to remember that when we were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, when we officially got a new title, that is, when we became *Christian*, we all got a *working* *title*.

Not, of course, in the sense of the film industry, when a working title is a temporary name for a project during development, but in the sense that being a Christian is as much about the *doing* as it is in the *believing*.

Being a Christian is a *working* title – not just a status, but a *calling*. We are called to live out our baptism in our daily lives. Being in a Christian is not a spectator sport, being a Christian is not for couch potatoes.

God affirms all God’s children as beloved and favored, and so we are called to get to work doing the same. For the Christian, for the follower of the one who went down into the muddy river of Jordan in solidarity with all manner of sinners, there is no room for judgment, for refusing to value your brother or sister because of the color of their skin, their country of origin, their economic status, their sexual orientation, their age, their health, you name it.

Baptized into the family of the one we know as the Prince of Peace, we are called to get to work advocating for peace in our homes, in our church, in the organizations we participate in, in our communities, in our world.

Baptized into a community which seeks God’s justice, we are called to work for justice for all people – for racial justice, in a country still tainted by the legacy of slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, segregation, and prejudice; for economic justice, in an era of unprecedented disparity in the distribution of wealth in our society, where the billionaires call the shots and the rest of us pick up the bill; for justice for women, still struggling for equal pay for equal work in our nation once again struggling to make their own health care decisions.

Baptized in living water, we are called to become stewards of all of God’s good creation, working together to protect the environment, cleanse its rivers and streams and oceans, combat acid rain, do all we can to halt the global warming which threatens so many ecosystems and populations around the globe.

Baptized into the family and faith of Jesus Christ, you and me, individually and together, we all got a working title: Christian. May we all get to work living up to it. And when Jesus call to you, the waters of your baptism metaphorically dripping off your forehead, may you, may I, reply, Here I am, Lord. Here I am. Amen.

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