

**The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA**

10 January 2016

Luke 3:15-22

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany and as such, today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. The Baptism account in the Synoptic Gospels marks the beginning of this season, which ends with the feast of the transfiguration of our Lord. Baptism and Transfiguration mark the bookends of this season. The very beginning and the very end of this time of “making known” (Epiphany) have the same sequence of events: The skies are opened and the voice of God thunders, “You are my beloved one, in you I am well pleased.” God’s affirmation of his son, marks the beginning of Jesus ministry after Baptism and marks the beginning of his journey to Jerusalem, where he will die. It would appear that for the Gospels, being the beloved son of God means being thrust into service, which will lead to death. Perhaps this makes God’s affirmation of his son the most appropriate and necessary. The mission ahead will be difficult, and it will lead to the cross. Christ, the obedient one, pleases his father by willingly accepting this mission.

The affirmation, “You are my beloved” comes before the mission starts and before the passion in Jerusalem begins. God’s affirmation of his son is given before the journey starts. The affirmation “You are my beloved” is not attached to the Son’s behaviors or actions. God’s acceptance and love for his son has always been and will always be. It is his identity as the “Son of God” that makes Jesus the “Beloved” and not his actions. We know that his action of obedience to the Father “even to death in a cross” is found well-pleasing by God, but God’s love for his Son begins before his mission for the world.

Luke tells us a few things in this passage: (a) The people are filled with expectation, which means they eagerly await the coming of the Messiah, (b) They “question in their hearts about John”, which means they wonder if he is the Messiah, (c) John makes it clear that he is not the Messiah. He gives them a few reasons why the Messiah is superior: “1. The Messiah is more powerful than I am. 2. My baptism is different to his baptism. Mine is with water for repentance, his is with the Holy Spirit and fire (for the forgiveness of sins.) 3. He is the one who clears the threshing floor and separates the wheat from the chaff, and he is the one who determines what happens to both the wheat and the chaff.”

Our Lectionary takes a break after John finishes his testimony about the Messiah. We are not given verses 18-21, as the reading jumps directly to verse 22 with the statement about Jesus’ baptism. I find those three verses significant. Luke says that

“With many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod, the ruler who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.” When you read the passage as it is given to us, it would appear as though Jesus is baptized by John and immediately the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus with the heavenly proclamation. But, when you add the 3 verses that are omitted, you get a different story. Jesus is baptized with the people, we presume by John, then, John the Baptist is arrested by Herod and placed in jail. It is sometime after John’s arrest, while Jesus is in prayer, that the heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and makes the famous proclamation. This is a different sequence than Mark and Matthew, both of whom present the heavenly apparition and testimony at the time of baptism. In Luke’s case, the emphasis is not so much on the baptism event, but rather, on the coming of the Holy Spirit as Jesus is in prayer at some point after the baptism.

For Luke, time could be divided into 3 different stages: (a) The time of the prophets which ends with John’s incarceration and death; (b) The time of Jesus, the Messiah, who, filled by the Holy Spirit, preaches the Good News of God’s kingdom, gathers a group of followers, undergoes suffering and death, rises from the dead, and ascends to heaven; (c) The age of the Holy Spirit who builds a church, gives testimony about the son, and commissions this church to go out to the ends of the world in mission. Another way to say this is that in Luke we have the age of the Old Testament, the age of Christ, and the age of the Church.

We live in this third age. We are in the age of the Church and the age of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that Christ is not among us anymore, what it means is that Christ’s spiritual presence among us can only be seen and felt through the intervention of His Holy Spirit in our lives. It is this Holy Spirit who gives testimony about Christ and who reminds us daily of the one to whom we belong, the one who paid the price to ransom us and make us free. We no longer see Jesus in his physical form in the way the disciples and apostles saw him. That age is past. In this new age, we only see Jesus as the Holy Spirit reveals him to us. This revelation comes primarily from Holy Scripture, but it also includes an element of daily commissioning for ministry that comes through our baptism, through a life of prayer, and through the daily gifts the Holy Spirit gives us in our lives.

Many of us forget that we live in this third age, the age of the Holy Spirit. We do a good job learning about Jesus, but we forget about the Holy Spirit. It is right to learn as much as we can about Jesus, after all, everything about Holy Scripture points to him and becomes fulfilled in him. But we can not forget that there is more to Jesus than history. There is more to Jesus than the 33 years he lives on this earth. Jesus as the Christ has always been and will always be. He is here today, but we can only see him if we allow

God's Holy Spirit to reveal him to us. The Holy Spirit gives daily testimony about the Son of God, but we can only hear this testimony if we are willing to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. The problem, as I see it, is that we are so afraid to be seen as "Pentecostals", "Charismatics", or "Enthusiasts" that we purposely ignore the mighty ways in which God's Holy Spirit leads us into a deeper relationship with God's Son.

Today, Luke reminds us that there is nothing we can do without God's Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who rests upon us and declares us "Children of God" and "Beloved". It is God's Holy Spirit who commissions us for ministry in our communities and in our world. But, let me be clear when I say that God's approval and love of us precedes any act of commissioning. At our own baptisms, which for most of us took place as infants, God made us his own and declared us "beloved," not because we had done anything to deserve this classification and not because we were righteous. This acceptance and commissioning were gifts freely given out of his abundant mercy and his generous grace.

To be the beloved means that we are set-apart for ministry: we are sanctified, we are consecrated to his service, and we sent-out to love and serve him to the ends of the world. This is what it means to be baptized into Christ. Because we are the beloved we engage in mission, but it is important to know that we don't go out as people seeking our own redemption, but rather we go out as redeemed people seeking to share our faith and our love with those who don't yet know Christ. The mission field is anywhere there are men and women who don't know Christ as their Savior, and anywhere Christ is seen as not relevant in people's lives.

I pray that each of you will choose to welcome God's Holy Spirit into your lives today and that you will let God use you in his Kingdom in mighty ways. He is alive, he is with us, and he needs us to be his feet and his hands in a hurting world. Today, as we reaffirm our baptismal vows, I pray that you will pay close attention to those promises you will make. I pray that you will leave this building filled with God's Holy Spirit and ready to live out your baptism daily. Amen!