

NORTH MAIN UMC SERMON JANUARY 12, 2025

Luke 3:15-17

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with^[a] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with^[b] 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 barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Luke 17:20-24 ²⁰ Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, ²¹ nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.”^[a] ²² Then he said to his disciples, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. ²³ People will tell you, ‘There he is!’ or ‘Here he is!’ Do not go running off after them. ²⁴ For the Son of Man in his day^[b] will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.

John 3:1-17

³ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.^[a]” ⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely, they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[c] must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”^[d] ⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus

asked.¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.^[e] ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^[f] ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”^[g]¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. The word of God for the people of God..

In the season of Epiphany we look at those special events in Jesus' life where his presence was especially manifested with power. Jesus' baptism is one of those powerful events. Today is the Day to celebrate the Baptism of Jesus.. We heard Luke's version read this morning. The Holy Spirit descended in Luke's Gospel it states...

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² 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.”

In the Gospel readings of Luke, the focus in this story is not on what happened in the water, like there was something special in the water. , but it was focused on the coming of the Holy Spirit.. That is Luke's version. All four gospels portray this scene. But Luke's version is a little different than the others. In each version, though, the Spirit descends "like a dove." Luke and the other apostles use the dove as a metaphor for the Spirit's coming into our lives. It is graceful, gentle, and quiet. That's the point being made. That is the way the Holy Spirit will enter into our lives. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus gently, quietly, and in Luke's version, privately. That is why Luke is different than the other three gospels. The other writers imply that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, apparently when he was still in the water. Jesus, standing waist deep in water. John the Baptist standing next to him, pointing at Jesus, as if to say, "This is the one! That's the way all the other gospels picture it. But Luke is different. He says, "Now when all the people were baptized, and

when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the Holy Spirit descended upon him." Which means that the Epiphany, this special presence of God in this event, came to Jesus when he was by himself, praying. In other words, it wasn't a public event. It was a personal and private experience. No one else saw it. No one else heard that voice from heaven. He came out of the water, went off by himself, and prayed. That is when it happened. Luke, more than any other gospel, emphasizes that Jesus prayed...

Before the Holy Spirit descended at Jesus' baptism, Jesus worked in the carpenter shop, studied the Scriptures at the synagogue, thought deeply, and prayed. At least that's what we have been told.. At this time he was thought to be about 30 years old and the son of Joseph. There's not a lot known about Jesus youth from the time he stayed behind at the temple when he was 7 until the day of his baptism. The most skeptical New Testament scholars, the ones who question the historicity of almost everything, agree on this story. The baptism of Jesus happened as certainly as any event in the Gospels. They come to this conclusion not only because three Synoptic Gospels record it, but because the early church wouldn't have told this story if they didn't have to.

The Good News is that through Jesus, God makes a similar offer. Something wonderful happens to us when we are baptized. When we are baptized, we identify ourselves with Jesus. We publicly declare our intention to strive to be like Jesus and follow God's will for our lives. When we are baptized, our lives are changed. We see things differently than before. We see other people differently than before. Baptism enables and empowers us to do the things that Jesus wants us to do here and now. We are able to identify with Jesus because He was baptized. And we are able to love as he loved. The Baptism of the Lord is a perfect time to remind ourselves of the commitment to living a life of grace and hope outwardly. We are counting the weeks after Epiphany and attempting to get a glimpse of what life as the people of God might be like.

As a prophet of God, John the Baptist had the authority to baptize the people of Israel as a sign of their repentance before God. Imagine John the Baptist choosing such an approach of communicating his message out

in the wilderness of Judea—“REPENT...in the name of love.” John stood in the waters of the Jordan River and shouted out, “Come on in; the water’s fine.” Yet here is the surprising thing. John is wildly successful. People are pouring out of the big city of Jerusalem to the wilderness not only to hear John preach, but also to be baptized by him as a sign that they had indeed repented of their sins. The word “repent” in the New Testament is composed of two Greek words: “meta,” which means to change or transform, and “noia,” which means mind. So John is preaching, “Repent. Transform your mind by aligning it with the mind of God.” And some joined him, and others stood on the shore. . Today, we look at one who took him up on the invitation and joined him in the waters. Why would the Christ, the child of God, submit to a baptism of repentance? If baptism is for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus is sinless, then what does Jesus’ baptism mean? Matthew points out that John himself was uneasy and hesitant. Luke makes as little of the event as possible, casually mentioning that Jesus was baptized after everyone else was baptized. Mark only allows Jesus’ baptism three verses. This story is difficult, in part, because John the Baptist is difficult. John storms out of the wilderness, eating locusts and washing them down with honey, proclaiming a new kingdom, coming in water and fire, and warning—especially the religious people—of the wrath to come. John’s baptism is revolutionary. He treats Jews like Jews treated pagan converts, requiring them to be baptized, calling them to repentance. Jesus has arrived at a place along the Jordan River where John the Baptist is preaching to Israel with the message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. John has been baptizing those willing to publicly repent of sin and renew their commitment to live in faithfulness to the Lord. John recognizes that Jesus is the very Messiah he has been preaching about. We don't know when John discovered this. He may have been taught it as a child, accompanied by his parent's explanation of the circumstances of Jesus' birth. In any case, John resists the idea that he should baptize Jesus. He had said of the Messiah, after all, that he was not even worthy to carry His sandals. John, as a humble man, was aware of his own sinfulness. He declares that he needs to be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around. By this, John may have meant that he wanted Jesus to conduct his own baptism of repentance. Or, perhaps, he wanted Jesus to baptize him with the Holy Spirit and fire as he said the Messiah would do for those who repented.

As a prophet of God, John had the authority to baptize the people of Israel as a sign of their repentance before God. He could not imagine he had the authority to baptize the Messiah. Also, he likely understood that Jesus had no sin to repent from. Nor would God's Promised One need to declare a change of mind to the people. From John's perspective, there was no point in such a baptism!

Surprisingly, crowds flock to John to be baptized; but he knows his work is preparatory and partial. After him one will come who will baptize not in water but in Spirit. The day soon comes when this one wades out into the muddy Jordan. When Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees heaven split wide open and the Spirit descending like a dove. He hears the voice of God saying, "This is my child." The people gathered on the shore have no idea what it all means. They probably assume that Jesus is now one of John's disciples. Without the rest of Jesus' life his baptism is incomprehensible.

The purpose of Jesus' baptism is seen in the days and years that follow that afternoon in the Jordan. It's when we see Jesus take his place with hurting people that his baptism starts to make sense. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan foreshadows his baptism on the cross. Baptism is Jesus' commissioning for ministry. Remember that during the week before Jesus' death, the leaders of the temple challenged him, "By what authority do you do these things?" Jesus answered with a reference to his baptism, "Was the baptism of John from heaven or not? I was baptized. That's how all this started."

In the waters of baptism, Jesus heard the Spirit calling him to speak the truth and live with grace. Jesus was true to the voice. Jesus gave everything— his days and nights, his hopes and dreams, his work and his life itself. Jesus gave himself to God's people—sharing, listening, and ministering. When Jesus cried on the cross, "It is finished," it was his baptism that was complete.

Baptisms, like all beginnings, find their meaning after the event. Starting, by itself, is of little consequence. Beginning is easy. Finishing is hard.

We too often think that what we need is a new start. Our culture has an appetite for new things. People look for something new, but we can add a

thousand meaningless new things. “What’s new?” isn’t a bad question, but if we constantly pursue only what’s new, the result is an endless parade of trying to get better things. We ought to be consumed with the question, “What’s best?” We spend too much time looking for what’s new without exploring what’s best for us. We don’t need new beginnings nearly so much as we need to make sense of the old beginnings. Baptism is a beginning, the introduction to a book waiting to be written.. It takes our whole life to finish our baptisms. Just as Jesus’ life gave meaning to his baptism, so our baptisms wait to be given meaning through each of our lives. When Martin Luther was tempted to give up on following Christ, he would sit in his study and recite, almost as a mantra, “I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized.”

When Jesus climbed down the bank into the river, John was most likely shocked. . How he knew who Jesus was, we aren’t told. Maybe it is something from their shared family history that gave John the clue as to who was standing in front of him. Maybe it was a whisper from the Spirit in John’s ear as Jesus approached and what he heard made him think that something was wrong in the way this scene was playing out. Maybe there is just something about the face of Jesus that caused fishermen to leave their nets and broken people to reach out in hope and powerful people to tremble in their boots and this wild man from the desert to want to fall to his knees and be blessed instead of attempting to confer a blessing.

He could not imagine he had the authority to baptize the Messiah. Also, he likely understood that Jesus had no sin to repent from. Nor would God's Promised One need to declare a change of mind to the people. From John's perspective, there was no point in such a baptism! Jesus explains His insistence on being baptized by John in the following verse Matthew 3: 15... **“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”** Let it be so for now? What makes sense to me is that Jesus is saying, “I want to join the party. I want to be seen joining the party. I want my ministry, my life, my witness to be one about becoming a part of the body, about joining up with the kingdom of God.” John’s hesitation may have something to do with his understanding of baptism being one of repentance, of forgiveness of

sins. And this man had no need to have sins forgiven. So, why would he consent to this baptism? Maybe Jesus' view of what was happening was larger. Maybe John, and most of us, think of repentance as turning away. When we repent, we turn away from our sins, our life of sin. We are sorry for what had gone on before; we are sorry for what we had done before and we are pledging to not engage in those behaviors again. That is how we understand repentance. But what if Jesus understood repentance to be primarily a turning toward? What if the gesture that Jesus was making was one of inclusion or acceptance or entrance? This was a beginning moment for the ministry that Jesus would perform. This was a sign that something new was about to be launched. And this new thing was nothing less than the kingdom of God, nothing less than a new way of living in community. **Then John consented.** The necessary requirement for baptism in The United Methodist Church is the community of the Church. Baptism is a corporate act; it is almost always done as a part of worship. We state things as a Congregation about supporting each other and accepting each other. Baptism is an entrance into the fellowship of believers; it is a joining up with the body. Once you have been baptized, you are never alone. There is always a family around you. You have joined something larger than yourself. None of us can be a Christian on our own. Our own will is not enough. Our own choice is not enough. Our faith always exists within the context of a community. This is how God has always intended things to be. Our scripture reading today is the story of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. But today is also a day to re-affirm our baptism.. ." Baptism teaches us who we are - God's beloved children - and confers upon us the promise of God's love and caring for us.

Baptism renewal is a powerful way to launch a new year for the faithful. All baptized and confirmed members of The United Methodist Church have already made that promise and are living into that grace. This week is the start of the promise to be that example, to claim that grace and gift, and to embrace the responsibility of being the church in the world right now. Everyone should join in; What did it mean when you were baptized? It might be helpful to look back to that day, but the

meaning of your baptism is more likely to be seen this day. Are you grateful today for the grace of God? What have you done today that you wouldn't have done if you had not been baptized?

Today .. we have an opportunity to re-affirm our faith with the symbolic water ..

All are welcome to re- commit to God.....(pg 50).....Turn in Hymnal