

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (Baptism of Jesus)

Messiah fever was running rampant as rumours about John the Baptist and his message swept the countryside. Luke tells us, "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ." People had high hopes. They were looking for someone like David to once again lead the people of Israel to great power and prominence. As they listened to John, they couldn't help but wonder; "Would this strange and wild-looking man with eyes of fire be the one to rally and lead the people?"

John, however, was only the forerunner, whose mission was - to prepare the way for the Coming One - the one who was far more powerful than he was. And what exactly was it that John, along with those who had followed this Jesus, actually see in Jesus? He certainly did not look very strong or powerful. How could he be the promised Messiah? Luke gives a very simple account:

"When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened 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.'"

God's declaration from heaven was very clear and to the point. This Jesus of Nazareth who had just been baptized was in fact his own Son. The Father's pleasure would continue throughout Jesus' ministry, including his suffering and death on the cross.

God has caused the light of Epiphany's revelation to dawn on our hearts. We are brought to faith, so that through the eyes of faith, we are able to see that on that day on the banks of the Jordan - it was indeed the promised Messiah who was baptized.

As we follow Jesus from the manger to the cross - we are continuously reminded of who he is. John the Baptist calls him the Christ, the Greater One who fulfilled God's promises. God calls him his Son in whom he was well pleased. The story of Jesus' baptism is pivotal because in Jesus' baptism, heaven and earth are joined. Jesus saw heaven open as if he found a crack or a door into another dimension of reality.

Today, we live in an age that is suspicious of spiritual realities and cynical of the relevance of religious institutions. Perhaps, the Church has given people much to be cynical about. Take the baptism of Jesus as an example. We have theologized it and argued about it, reducing its true significance.

Most outrageous of all, the Christian Church has tried to claim ownership of baptism. Some say a person must be baptized into the Roman Catholic or Orthodox or some other church to receive salvation. Others say infant baptism doesn't count - a person must be baptized as a youth or adult. Others say that unless one is fully immersed in the water, it doesn't count. Full dunk - no polite sprinkling will do.

A story like Jesus' baptism, is so powerful that we would rather turn it into something bite-sized than encounter the inexplicable, the mystery, the bewildering strangeness of it all. Instead of standing on the shore of a vast, churning ocean, we turn and look for a puddle that we can fence in as our own.

Sometimes it is those who are not fully absorbed in the Church who offer the most insightful observations. One evening the New Testament professor from Princeton Seminary visited a high school youth group. As he was speaking about the baptism of Jesus, he noticed a boy sitting aloof in the back, slouched in a chair, staring at the floor. After the professor finished explaining the significance of Christ's baptism as a revelation of God's presence in Jesus, without looking up, the young man blurted out, "That ain't what it means."

Glad that the student had been listening enough to disagree, the professor asked, "What do you think it means?" "The story says that the heavens were opened, right?" "Right." "The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God came down, right?" "That's right." The boy finally looked up and leaned forward, saying, "It means that God is on the loose in the world. And it is dangerous."

After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness, and it was dangerous. Jesus taught in the temples, and it was dangerous. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and it was dangerous. Jesus confronted the authorities and turned over the table, and it was dangerous. That high school student listened closely enough to the story to grasp the power of it and realize the awe of it.

We often speak about the nearness of God and the comforting love of God. It's true - God can come to us gently and tenderly. But, it is a mistake to forget the marvelous immensity and power of God, because that is when we can slip into an attitude of taming God by trying to keep God on a leash. A tame God is a manageable God. You have heard the saying, "God created people in God's own image; and then we returned the favour." This is especially apparent in the language and metaphors we use to describe God. But, any of the names we have for God are completely inadequate.

God as Father, God as Mother, God as Wind, God as Fire - all are Biblical metaphors for the Absolute. And they are all equally true and untrue. When we argue that the true reference to God is one rather than the other, we end up turning from the ocean and putting a fence around our puddle. We forget that God cannot be boxed in or contained in a name.

The Jewish tradition is clear about this in the very name of God, Yahweh, refers to the God that is beyond words and language and images. Remembering the magnificence of God, even the danger of God, helps to keep us from creating a God in our own image.

And so when we, as the Church argue about who does baptism right, or bicker about how

we are to speak about God, people roll their eyes and walk away and consider the Church irrelevant. And if we get caught up in these theological eddies.....we are the ones who become irrelevant. When we diminish God, we diminish our acts of discipleship. That high school student had it right;

God is running loose in the world, and it is dangerous. Perhaps he was able to sense this because he risked coming close enough to the story to feel the baptism himself. Heaven is open. And it is risky in the world. It is risky because at any moment you may be baptized by the Spirit of God, and your life may take dramatic new turns, and you may find yourself in a wilderness.

Jesus came out of the desert and went to the temple, where he let scripture speak about the danger of God.

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me.
For He has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor.
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And to the blind new sight.
To set the oppressed free,
And to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*

And after the encounter with the angel, Mary sings of the danger of God:

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.*

The danger of God is that God's measure is not our measure. God's standard for blessing is not our standard for success. We hear God's blessing as a backwards blessing that brushes aside all we have worked for proudly holding our trophies of accomplishment. Perhaps this is why Jesus spent most of his time with those who have few or no trophies to declare. Jesus came back from the wilderness and found that those who had positions to protect, those who had reputations to defend, those who had power to guard - sought to justify themselves and refused to be open to the Spirit of God in Jesus. Heaven is open to all, but some choose to stay curled up in their own little rooms.

On the other hand, perhaps there is, as some theologians call it, "a preferential option for the poor." Perhaps because the poor and the outcast are broken open by life's hardships, they are more willing and ready to risk the danger of God. If, after years of work, one's nest is comfortably feathered, why move? But if one has nowhere to lay one's head, why not God? When oppressed or when ill or grieving, one may be more eager to see the heavens open and the Spirit flying like a dove. Why not approach heaven? Why not risk baptism?

Part of the danger of God's running loose in the world is that baptism is not confined to a

ritual. Generally speaking, it is any encounter we have with the holy that leaves us feeling clean and refreshed, as if we have just stepped out of a hot bath. A vision may be a kind of baptism. A "peak experience" may be a baptism. But heaven is open to us in less miraculous ways as well. After participating in a Taize service, one's soul feels as if it has been baptized again, cleansed by the prayer of music. The tiny hands of a baby touching your face or squealing with delight can make you feel baptized. Running on the beach; laughing with a friend; holding hands, walking along the ridge of a mountain. Heaven is open.

Frederick Buechner writes about the ritual of baptism: Baptism consists of getting dunked or sprinkled. Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head. However, dunking is a better symbol. Going under symbolizes the end of everything about your life that is less than human. Coming up again symbolizes the beginning in you of something strange and new and hopeful. You can breathe again.

When we risk God's baptism, we lose that which is less than human. When we risk baptism, we see that heaven is open; and once again we can breathe. This is why, in our prayers of confession, we discover that in Christ we find liberation and forgiveness. In the liberation and forgiveness of Christ - ah! we can breathe again. God is running loose in the world. There is a danger that our trophies may not be worth much. Heaven is open right now. Let us receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and breathe again.

Theologians continue to wrestle with why Jesus chose to be baptized. Most will agree that this was the Lord's visible demonstration that he really was WITH us - With us in our fears, with us in our foolishness, with us in our failures, with us all the way down into the mud of the Jordan. The climax of the baptismal scene in scripture is glorious. The dove - the voice - "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The fact that, in his baptism, Jesus heard God's "term of endearment," provides something important for us. Baptism can be seen as a first word of God's love and acceptance for you and me. When we remember and celebrate our own baptism, we recall that we, too, have been called God's child.

In baptism we find our affirmation. That is where we find strength for the struggle, courage for the crises, and hope for the future. We are part of God's family, each of us God's own child - never alone. And there is nothing - that can ever separate us from that love of God in Christ Jesus all the days of our lives. Amen!