



“Not My Job”

Scripture – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, January 10, 2016

With the birth of Jesus still fresh in our minds, we turn the page to read what comes next. What we find is Jesus being baptized as a fully mature adult. Doesn't it feel as if we have skipped a few chapters? I would love to hear the scoop on his childhood, wouldn't you?

Was he a delightful child who needed no discipline or did Mary and Joseph have to apply a heavy hand? How well did he interact with the neighborhood children? The Bible barely breathes a word about the early years of Jesus. The Gospels of Mark and John fall completely silent. Matthew and Luke provide us with memorable details surrounding his birth, but only Luke mentions his childhood. He shares the familiar story when 12 year old Jesus mesmerized the Temple rabbis with his wisdom.

That is why the church calendar jettisons us forward from the birth stories of Jesus to his baptism as an adult. There is not a single scrap of information on Jesus between the ages of 13 and 30. So, here we are: today is Baptism of our Lord Sunday, a time to ponder the day that Jesus stepped into the Jordan River, and also a chance to reflect on the significance of our own baptism.

If you venture to the Holy Land today, there are certain sites you will not want to miss. The Old City of Jerusalem – where Jesus preached, shared the Last Supper, was sentenced to death and rose from the tomb. The Dead Sea, the lowest place on the planet and where even a 350 pounder can float with the best of them. And the Jordan River – one of the surprises for most of us. To paraphrase The Old Gray Mare – the Jordan River ain't what she used to be many long years ago. However, that does not detract from the fact that it is a thin place – a rare and wonderful spot where the curtain between heaven and earth seems sheer.

On a spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2009, a group of us from Westminster visited the Jordan River late one afternoon as the sun was setting. It was a special moment to ponder this river we had heard about all of our lives, and to imagine Jesus, John the Baptist and a crowd of others wading in the water. We read the familiar Scripture story of Jesus being baptized, the heavens opening, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and a voice from above saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” As we stood there pondering the event, two doves came out of nowhere and flew down the river toward the sunset. We were stunned into a deep reflective silence. I still have chills when I recall that moment.

In 2014, when we took a second pilgrimage to the Holy Land, many of us stepped down into the flowing water of the Jordan River. As we reflected on the baptism of Jesus, we reaffirmed our own baptismal vow and I baptized our newest member at the time. We will not forget that day.

Baptism marks our uniting with the church and the ministry of Jesus. Obviously, little James, whom we baptized a few minutes ago, does not comprehend all of that. But, subconsciously, he is already learning that he is a part of a loving community. And if Sarah and John are faithful to their vows to live the Christian faith and to teach James that faith; and if we are faithful to our vows to support James and his parents, and to do what we can to encourage him to be a faithful Christian, then there is a great possibility that he will try to follow the footsteps of Jesus.

In an interview, Maya Angelou was asked if she read the Bible for inspiration to pick up her pen. She responded that she read the Bible “for melody and for content.” She said, “I’m working at trying to be a Christian and that is serious business. It’s like trying to be a good Jew, a good Muslim, a good Buddhist, a good friend, a good lover, a good mother – it’s serious business.” She added, “It’s not something where you think, ‘I’ve got it now.’ The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it, and in the evening, if you are honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, ‘Hmm, I only blew it 86 times today. Not bad.’ I’m *trying* to be a Christian.”¹

Baptism is a beginning point, a launching pad. It is a visible action that serves to remind us that we are trying to follow the footsteps of Jesus. Every occasion we have to witness a baptism ought to remind us of that fact.

Author Seth Godin gave a TED Talk on “Things that are Broken.” The impetus for his talk came when he flew into the Newark Airport and needed to catch a cab. After collecting his bags he walked out of the building to the cab stand. The bad news is that there were about 75 people in line for a taxi. The good news is that there were about 75 taxis. The really frustrating, hair-pulling, cursing news is that it took him nearly an hour to get a taxi. “There is a man in a uniform who will get you in trouble if you just go and get in a taxi. If they would simply say, ‘Go get in a taxi, it would work. But it doesn’t work because they have created this complicated process that takes forever.”

Godin came up with a list of seven reasons why things are broken. The one that everyone experiences is what he calls “Not my job.”

All of us run into these frustrating situations where we are dealing with a business and we point out a problem to an employee and a solution to the problem. However, nothing ever happens because it’s not his/her job to fix it. Godin held up a prescription bottle that came from a national chain of pharmacies. The prescription was for a dog. And along with the instructions to take one tablet daily, it says, ‘Alcohol may intensify the effects of this medication. Use care when operating a car or heavy machinery.’ The pharmacist filling this prescription knows that it’s for a dog, but it’s not her job to decide not to put the sticker on the bottle. So you end up with something that makes no sense.²

When Jesus was baptized, God’s Spirit descended upon him, commissioning him for his life’s work, which was fixing what was broken – broken systems and broken people. He was to love others, he was to confront the religious and political leaders who fostered a corrupt system that kept people in poverty, and he was to work for the common good.

When we are baptized, God commissions us to join with Jesus in fixing what is broken. When we encounter people with mental illness or drug addiction who are homeless and walking our streets, we can no longer say, “It’s not my problem.” When we realize we are poisoning the water or polluting the air, we cannot say, “It’s not my problem.” When racism prompts deadly action, we cannot say, “It’s not my problem.” When someone we know is ill or lonely or grieving, we cannot say, “It’s not my problem.” When violence in our city becomes rampant, we cannot say, “It’s not my problem.” When refugees flee for their lives and beg for a safe haven, we cannot say, “It’s not my problem.” Because once we have been baptized, we join the ministry of Jesus to become healing agents in our world.

Some of the problems we encounter are complex and overwhelming. They are beyond what any one person can fix. However, nothing will ever happen if we do not alter our mindset. When we encounter a need, our first thought

cannot be, “It is not my concern; someone else needs to fix it.” The instant that thought surfaces in our mind, we need to challenge it, and say to ourselves, “There must be something I can do. There must be somewhere I can help.”

A man sat near the front of the church on the morning his granddaughter was baptized. Along with his granddaughter, another child was being baptized. Following the service, the families gathered at the front of the sanctuary for photos. Each family took its turn gathering around the baptismal font. At some point, the grandfather was handed the other family’s child to hold while the mother searched her bag for a bottle. Someone walked up at that moment and asked him if this was his child. “Oh, no,” he replied, “this child belongs to the other family. I’m just holding him for a moment.”

“The next day, the pastor received a call from this grandfather saying he needed to come in and talk. The pastor was worried that something happened at the baptism that the grandfather did not like.”

“When the man arrived, he told his pastor about the incident of holding the other family’s child. He said, ‘I’ve been thinking about that. I said that the other child did not belong to me. That isn’t true. Every child in this church belongs to my family. I have made arrangements in my will to support my immediate family. Now I want to make arrangements in my will to support all the children of this church. Can you help me do that?’”³

None of us can do everything, but each of us can do something. God has commissioned you for vital work. May you know the work God calls you to do and may God give you the energy and the inspiration to do it well.

NOTES

1. Mark Ramsey, “Unexpected Guests,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2015, p. 51.
2. Seth Godin, “Things That Are Broken,” TED talk, www.ted.com.
3. Mark E. Diehl, “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: The Practice of Extravagant Generosity,” February 9, 2014.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

In the beginning you spoke to chaos, O God of life. Your Spirit swept over the waters and creation dawned. In days of new beginning, you spoke to crowds gathered at the Jordan. As water washed over your Son and the Spirit descended as a dove, your voice burst forth from heaven. You still speak, sometimes in a thundering cry, sometimes in a gentle whisper. Speak to us this day.

Speak your healing Word to all in need of comfort and hope. We lift before you those who are grieving, those who are lonely, those who are sick. Speak into the lives of those who need work and those who need rest; those who live under the threat of violence, and those who face this day with fear or uncertainty. Remind them, remind us, that we are all your beloved children. Speak, Lord, that we may be whole.

Even as we pray for healing, we ask that you would use us for your work. We rejoice that you claim us in the waters of Baptism, and call us to ministry with you. Pour out your Spirit upon us, we pray, and empower us to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Give us hands to serve and hearts to love, and voices to call for justice. That we who have been baptized into Christ may further your Kingdom in this world.

We pray these and all things in the name of your beloved son, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.