



"Claimed and Commissioned"
Scripture – Luke 3:15-22
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 9, 2022

Late Thursday night, Camilla and I kept peeking out our windows. One of us would ask, "Has it begun snowing?" And the other would respond, "No, not yet."

We love snow and we were hoping to peer out at the lampposts and catch the elegance of snowflakes drifting down from the night sky and transforming lawns and trees into a winter wonderland. Having never lived in Minnesota or Maine, and repeatedly contended with shoveling a path to the mailbox, I'm still fascinated by snow.

Snowflakes begin on earth in the water of oceans, lakes, and rivers. As water evaporates, it rises into the atmosphere in the form of water vapor. Cold air turns the water vapor into tiny droplets that latch onto pollen or dust that is floating way up overhead and they become ice crystals. These tiny ice crystals motor around the sky like bumper cars, colliding with molecules of water vapor and gathering more and more crystals until they become a snowflake. If conditions are right, they fall for miles until they land in our yards. Constantly changing weather conditions as they fall to earth make constant changes in each flake. By the time they reach earth, each snowflake is truly unique.

It's similar with people isn't it? Not one of us travels the exact same path, we grow under different conditions, and we bump into different people who have distinct impacts on us. Each of us goes through constant changes and each of us is unique.

A colleague (Aune Carlson) writes: Snowflakes "eventually melt, water the earth, and the water cycle continues. This water is the same water that has always existed on earth. Water is strong enough to cut through rock and gentle enough to cleanse. Life requires it to be sustained. Water has seen many lives – thunderstorms, bubbling creeks, teardrops, snowflakes, and baptismal waters."¹

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the day we remember John the Baptist performing the ritual on Jesus in the Jordan River. Have you ever thought that you may have had a sip of water and some of that H₂O might have washed over Jesus as he stood face to face with his cousin John in the Jordan? Or perhaps some of the snow that fell in our yards the other night contained the same water molecules that John splashed on Jesus 2,000 years ago. I like to ponder the possibility of such a physical connection with Jesus. It reminds me of our solidarity with him.

The gospels inform us that John the Baptist was in the wilderness by the Jordan River preaching fiery sermons that challenged people to repent. What do you suppose persuaded people to trudge down to the river to hear that their lives were a mess and they needed to make a change? For some, it might have been guilt and they were seeking forgiveness, but I think the primary lure was that John was cracking open a door by telling them it was possible to make a new beginning.

The waters of baptism remind us that there are times when we need to make a fresh start. We need to have the courage to take stock of where we are and to consider new possibilities. Throughout our lives, God forgives us numerous times, always with an eye to transforming us into a more fulfilled person who chooses the path of a challenging, but rich life.

That raises a prickly question posed by the passage. If one of the significant meanings of baptism has to do with forgiveness, then why did Jesus need to be baptized? The Gospel of Matthew recognizes this dilemma and says that John tried to prevent Jesus from stepping into the water, but Jesus insisted. Our reading from Luke does not record John's hesitancy, but points out that Jesus was baptized at the same time that *all* the people were baptized. Luke seems to be laying the groundwork for what becomes an essential theme of his gospel: Jesus stands in solidarity with us. He separates himself from no one.

John may have worried that if Jesus was baptized along with everyone else, some eyebrows might rise. People might have begun whispering about what hidden sin Jesus needed to confess. However, when Jesus presented himself for baptism it was not due to sin. He was declaring his intention to stand by us in all situations.

When we are baptized, it signals that God claims us as a beloved son or daughter. This is the deepest truth about who we are. Yet, our baptism signals not only that we are *claimed* by God, it also signals that we are *commissioned* by God. We are called to a way of living that is different from many in our culture. We are called to pattern our life after the life of Jesus – a life intent on loving others and a life brave enough to do what is right and good.

Albert Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he came to Einstein, the professor reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his trouser pockets. It wasn't there. He looked in his briefcase but could not find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. That ticket seemed to have disappeared.

The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it."

Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was preparing to step into the next car, he turned around and spotted the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket.

The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, please don't worry, I know who you are. No problem. I'm sure you bought a ticket."

Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going."²

Baptism is a beginning point, a launching pad. It is a visible action that reminds us that even though we may not know precisely where the path may lead us, we will strive to follow the footsteps of Jesus.

When we are baptized, God commissions us to join with Jesus in fixing what is broken. When someone we know is ill or lonely or grieving, we cannot say, "It's not my problem." When we encounter people with mental illness or drug addiction who are homeless and walking our streets, we cannot say, "It's not my problem." When we realize we are overheating our planet, we cannot say, "It's not my problem." When racism creates injustice, we cannot say, "It's not my problem." When refugees flee for their lives and need a safe haven, we cannot say, "It's not my problem." We cannot turn a blind eye to suffering, because once we have been baptized, we join the ministry of Jesus and we are commissioned to become healing agents.

Admittedly, many of the problems of our world feel overwhelming. They are well beyond what any one or two people can fix. However, we must decide whether we will contribute to the downward spiral or do what we can to resist it and to nudge our small corner of the planet in the right direction.

Author Chaim Potok knew from a young age that he wanted to be a writer, but on the day he left for college, his mother pulled him aside and said, "I know you want to be a writer, but I have a better idea. You are very bright, study to become a brain surgeon."

He replied, "No thanks, Mom. I want to be a writer." When he returned home after his first semester, his mother pulled him off alone and said, "Son, I know you want to be a writer, but listen to your mother. Become a brain surgeon. You will keep people from dying and you will make a lot of money." Again, he replied, "No Mom. I'm going to be a writer."

This conversation went on throughout his college years until his final year. In desperation, his mother said, "You are wasting your time! Be a brain surgeon. You will keep a lot of people from dying and you'll never be short of money."

He looked his mother squarely in the eyes, and said respectfully, but firmly, "Mother, I do not want to simply keep people from dying. I want to show them how to live! That is why I'm going to become a writer."³

God has commissioned you for vital, life-giving work. The next time you have a drink of water, may it remind you of your solidarity with Jesus. And may your bond with him spur you to choose compassion over apathy, courage over fear, peace over strife, and hope over despair.

NOTES

1. Aune Carlson, "A Prayer for the New Year," in an email from Churches for Middle East Peace on December 31, 2021.
2. The original source of this story is unknown. It can be found on a number of different websites.
3. Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Explanation in Vocational Holiness*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992), p.46.