

Prepare Ye The Way of the Lord
Luke 3:1a, 2-22
Isaiah 40: 1-8

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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(Baptism of the Lord)

Luke 3:1a, 2-22

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, ...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he 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.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Isaiah 40: 1-8

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

When we think about baptism, we have certain images that come to mind, don't we? Nervous parents, an inoffensive, kindly pastor, and a cute baby. A splash of water from the pastor's hand. A gasp of breath. A startled cry. The baby's full name. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Jesus' baptism did not have most of those things, but it had what was important. Jesus was an adult, a full-grown man, standing in the River Jordan. If his parents were there, their presence was not deemed important enough to write down. The man

baptizing Jesus, his cousin John, you remember, was many things, but I do not recall ever hearing him described as either kindly or inoffensive.

But the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were certainly all present. The Son stood in the water. The Father spoke from Heaven. And the Spirit came down as a dove.

Baptism, for the Jewish people, had meaning, a meaning different from the one we are familiar with. Baptism was re-doing the walk through the Red Sea, the one we recall from Exodus. Baptism was for people who had sinned so badly, that they did not deserve any more to even be considered a descendent of Abraham. They had to be purified, so that they could start again on their lives and their relationship with God and with God's people.

What you call people is important. Getting people's names right is important, because you are defining who they are, or, at least, who they are to you.

Calling a group something does that, too, even more directly. It is not an accident that I say to you every week, "The word of God, for the people of God." I am reminding you of who you are, and whose you are. I recall a high school teacher who used to refer to his class of bright but lazy senior students as "cretinous lizards," but even we understood that there was some affection in that description.¹

John was preaching to the people whom he less than affectionately called a brood of vipers, and he was baptizing any who confessed that he was right. Tax

¹ Mr. Eric Coble, if you ever read this, know that you are remembered forever with respect and affection.

collectors confessed extorting huge sums from people who had no recourse. Soldiers confessed taking money by false accusations and threats of violence.

John told them that they needed to repent, meaning turn their lives around in a U-turn, and do better. He told tax collectors to take no more than what the Roman government had told them to take, and he told soldiers to be satisfied with their wages, taking nothing to which they were not entitled.

And then John baptized them, telling them that their new life started right then, that they needed to be a new person from that moment forward.

So what was Jesus doing in line to be baptized by John? Jesus had not sinned. He was not one of the brood of vipers. So what was he doing there?

Jesus was preparing to start his ministry by being cleansed. We will be talking this Spring about Jesus' ministry, and some of the events that happened in his ministry. When he started his ministry by being baptized, God the Father publicly acknowledged him and told him that God was pleased with him.

In baptism, we are cleansed, and God puts God's mark on us as belonging to God. Baptism prepares us to start our ministry.

Most of you know that my ministry did not start last July when I knelt on the floor right down there to be ordained by the Presbytery. You recall that I was your student pastor before that, and before that I was a pastoral intern at Overbook Presbyterian Church in Clintonville. Before that, I was an elder for a decade or so at Hilliard Presbyterian, and I had been ordained there, too. But the truth is that my ministry did

not begin at ordination. It began at the First Presbyterian Church of Kent, Ohio, in 1971. That's when I was baptized.

I am not the only one here who has a ministry. Your ordained elders and deacons are not the only ones who have ministries. All of us who follow Christ have a ministry.

Feeding people is a ministry. That's easy to see, and can easily claim a link to Jesus' command, "You give them something to eat."²

Teaching children is a ministry, whether they are your children or other peoples'. When we baptize someone, we as a congregation promise to teach the person, together with a child's parents, if any, the Christian faith. Teaching them other, more secular things, too, is a ministry, and the manner in which you do it speaks volumes about the God whom you serve.

Being an example of a Christian in the workplace is a ministry, no matter what the workplace is. You show people what a Christian looks like by loving people. By striving to make ethical decisions even when taking a shortcut would be easier or you are told that it would be "good business."

Being an example of a Christian in the senior center, or in the neighborhood, or in the grocery store, is a ministry. You evangelize, or share the Good News, when you treat every person as if he or she is a child of the Almighty God, because they are. Not just when they act like it, and it's easy to treat them that way, but also when they do not

² Matt. 14:16, Mark 6L37, Luke 9:13.

act like it. Especially when they do not act like it, for it is then that they most need to be reminded of who they are, and whose they are.

Have you ever noticed the staff listing on the front of the bulletin here at Westminster? Yes, it lists our organist, Larry Smiley, and it lists me as the pastor. But it says here that the ministers here are all the congregants.

This is not just a cliché, this is the truth.

Every time we leave this building we are ministers. One definition of that word is, “a person acting as the agent or instrument of another.”³

Every time we leave this building we are the agents or instruments of God, charged to show the world that money and military might are not the point of life. We are charged to show the world the way of love, the way that Jesus showed the world when he came.

Sometimes we do a better job than others. All of us. But that’s no excuse to stop. We began this ministry at our baptism, and it is a ministry we never leave. Every time we interact with another human being, we show them who is Lord, whether that is Jesus Christ, or someone or something else.

This morning, let us remember our baptism, and be thankful.

AMEN.

³ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/minister>, definition 5.