Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

The Baptism of Christ

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BAPTIZED INTO MINISTRY Luke 3:15–22

The Gospel writers had a difficult time describing the baptism of Jesus. Tradition held that John the Baptist baptized Jesus but the writers could not understand the reason why. For tradition also held that Jesus was sinless, and if Jesus was sinless, why did he undergo John’s baptism? John’s baptism was, after all, a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The writer of Mark’s Gospel avoids the question by simply stating the fact that Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan. Matthew says that Jesus was baptized “to fulfill all righteousness,” that his baptism was something that God willed for everyone who wanted to live a righteous life. Luke avoids the issue altogether by leaving John out of the picture (John the Baptist is already in prison), simply stating that when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized.

All three Gospels agree, however, in one thing. They all state that when Jesus was baptized, a voice came from heaven, declaring, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

We may not know why Jesus was baptized, but we do know that his baptism was important for the establishing of his public identity. Everyone hears the voice from heaven. Now it is out in the open. Jesus is God’s Son, the Beloved. This is who Jesus is.

The Gospel writers agree also in the sequence of events, and this is important for what I want to say this morning. Immediately following Jesus’s baptism and God’s public declaration of his identity, Jesus is sent out into the wilderness to be tempted for forty days by the devil. Before Luke has Jesus go into the wilderness, he gives us the genealogy of Jesus, establishing him as a direct descendent of Adam. But then into the wilderness Jesus goes. It is in the wilderness that Jesus will work out the nature of his ministry. He will not use miracle, worldly power, or spectacle to win a following. His ministry will be a more modest ministry of love and grace, healing and forgiveness. Many will follow him at first, and most everyone, even the named disciples, will desert him in the end. Only a few women will remain by his side.

Such will be the nature of his ministry. The ministry of Jesus will inaugurate a movement rather than an institution. His ministry will set aside all notions of popularity and success and will be carried out for the sake of the peace and justice and love of God’s kingdom.

And what of us? Like Jesus, we too are baptized. We receive a public identity at our baptism. We are called by name. We are named God’s beloved sons and daughters. And like Jesus, gifted by the Spirit, we are baptized into ministry. From the baptismal waters, we are sent forth to minister in Jesus’s name. Like the ministry of Jesus, ours is a modest ministry into which we are baptized. It is a ministry of love and grace, peace and justice, healing and forgiveness.

Our ministry will carry on a movement, and that movement will take place in the midst of empire. And the empire will be suspicious of what we are up to, just as it distrusted the Jesus movement two thousand years ago, and the ministry of John the Baptist before him. The Empire imprisoned John and the Empire ended up crucifying Jesus. So you and I should not expect to be rewarded or praised for what we do in the world in the name and in the spirit of Jesus.

But there is something else our baptism can teach us. It can teach us that ordination is not the basis of ministry. Baptism is. There is great confusion in the church about this. Most people, I think, would say that ministry really belongs to the pastor, and that the pastor’s ministry is based in his or her ordination. Not so. Baptism was the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and it is the beginning of our ministry as well. We are all ministers because we have all been baptized. Ordination is simply the act of the church setting aside those who are called by God for full time pastoral ministry. But all of us, both clergy and lay, are baptized into ministry. The ministry of Jesus Christ belongs to all of us.

As long as we are confused about this, we will be subject to a kind of hierarchy in the church that Jesus himself would not recognize. We will set our pastors on pedestals. And we all know that pedestals are not all secure. If flowers are placed on them, they can easily tip over, and we know what then happens to the flowers. They fall. That is what happens to pastors also. They can easily fall.

How much better it is to understand that we are all called into ministry, lay and clergy alike. I love Martin Luther’s words on the subject:

. . . a cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office

of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and

bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other

by means of his own work or office so that in this way many

kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare

of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one

another.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Martin Luther knew his Bible well. He based his words on something Saint Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, words that shaped the beginning of this service when we renewed our baptismal vows:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there

are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are

varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of

them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the

Spirit for the common good. —1 Corinthians 12:4–7

. . . just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with

Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jew or Greeks, slaves or free—and were all made to drink of the one Spirit. (12–13)

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of

healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. (27–28)

Jesus was baptized; so are we. By our baptism, we are ministers all. And just as Jesus was baptized into a ministry rooted in the power of love rather than the power of might, so are we. We are not baptized into established religion; we are not baptized to be pleasing to the Empire and its power; we are baptized into a movement begun in Jesus and sustained by God’s own Spirit. As part of that movement, we do not seek to be established or honored. We do not seek worldly recognition and power. We do not seek to be rewarded. We seek only to love. We seek only to be faithful, to be salt and yeast in the world, and that little household light.

It is all so very modest, this ministry into which we have been baptized and to which we have been by the Spirit. There is nothing splashy or grandiose about it. To carry out this ministry takes only open minds and committed hearts, lives lived as God’s beloved sons and daughters. To such a ministry we dedicate ourselves anew this day. Amen.

1. Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)