

“Living into Baptism” a sermon by Rev, Keenan Colton Kelsey  
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church. 1/14/07

TEXT: Luke 3:15-17,21-22 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. 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.’

THIS IS THE WEEK AFTER EPIPHANY. Tinsel and lights are mostly packed away --the scraps of wrapping paper and empty boxes have been carted off to recycling. Normal life has returned, and in this season of the church, the baby Jesus has grown up. We have come to the point where the work of incarnation begins seriously. And it begins with baptism. Professor and preacher Fred Craddock tells a story about the time he and his wife were in a restaurant in the Smokey Mountains area of Tennessee. They were seated looking out at the mountains, when this old man, with shocking white hair, a Carl Sandburg-looking person came over and queried, "You're on vacation?" Craddock replied with a wary, "Yes" "What do you do," he asked. ("Well, I was thinking," Craddock notes, "that it was none of his business, but I let out that I was a minister"). Then he said, "Oh, a minister, well I've got a story for you." He pulled out a chair and began "I was born back here in these mountains. My mother was not married and as you might expect in those days, I was embarrassed about that -- at school I would hide in the weeds by a nearby river and eat my lunch alone because the other children were very cruel. And when I went to town with my courageous mother I would see the way people looked at me trying to guess who my daddy was. I attended Laurel Springs Church. The preacher fascinated me, but at the same time he scared me. He had a long beard, a rough-hewn face, a deep voice, but I sure liked to hear him preach. But I didn't think I was welcome at church so I would go just for the sermon. As soon as the sermon was over, I would rush out so nobody would say, 'What's a boy like you doing here in church?' 'One day though, the old man continued, I was trying to get out but some people had already got in the aisle so I had to remain. I was waiting, getting in a cold sweat when all of a sudden I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked out of the corner of my eye and realized it was the face of the preacher. And I was scared to death. The preacher looked at me. He didn't say a word, he just looked at me, and then he said, 'Well boy, you're a child of...' and he paused, and I knew he was going to try to guess not who my mother was but who my father was. The preacher said, 'You're a child of...um. Why, you're a child of God! I see a striking resemblance boy!' He swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Go claim your inheritance.'" And then the old man who was telling the story said to Fred Craddock, "I was born on that day!"

There is good reason that Christian liturgy is always saying “Remember your baptism.” For although baptism only happens once, it is our beginning. Living into it is a lifelong journey. Infant or adult, each of us is born again in baptism, Each of us is born to a new relationship with God, and a particular place in the community of faith. Baptism is God’s gift of the Spirit, and it moves us to respond, like a flower opening to the sun, to receive that spirit. And that Spirit can change our lives.

This is true of baby Billy, whom we baptized several weeks ago; it is true for Ramona today; it remains true for each of you. And it was true for Jesus himself. Consider our Gospel reading, without much fanfare, rather matter of fact, Jesus joins the crowds of questioning, desperate , yearning , seeking people.

In what was a dangerous act of faith, an act in direct defiance of Roman authorities, in direct opposition to the Jewish temple leaders, and in alignment and solidarity with the poor and oppressed, Jesus is among those baptized.

Shortly after, when Jesus stops to pray, the heavens open. And the Spirit comes down 'directly visible and physical', as a dove might descend. And then the voice: "You are my Child, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Oh what wonderful words – words of love and pleasure, words of delight and freedom, sacred words woven from sacred scripture. Being such a good exegete of the prophets, Jesus would have been reminded of Isaiah (43:1) "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." He would have been able to recite the rest of that promise: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." He would have recognized words: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him." (42:1).

And even more, Jesus would have realized he was being baptized to servanthood. Isaiah's suffering Servant is called to fight injustice; to reach out and touch the outcasts; to be that flickering candle struggling to withstand the hurricane forces of violence and hatred and greed and pride; to give sight to those who cannot see God through all the muck of the world; to open the ears of those whose hearing is deadened by the hucksters and politicians; to bust the prisoners out of the slammer and bring them along to serve a hot meal down at the soup kitchen; to bend, but not break; to be cursed, and give back a word of grace. It is no surprise that in the opening scene of Jesus' public ministry, when he appears before his home synagogue, he uses the words of Isaiah 61:1: The Spirit of God is upon me. God has claimed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoner, and sight for the blind, to release the oppressed." Baptism is more than a simple embrace. It catches us up in the work of the Spirit. Being God's beloved is an infusion that, as Emeril Lagasse, popular cooking show host, likes to say, "Bam! Let's take it up another notch!"

And so we Christians are called, over and over, to live into our baptisms. But what does that mean? It means that we are called to a new level of patience, and trust in God's providence. Doctor Thomas Kilgore, Jr., the first African-American President of the Southern Baptist Conference, has written about his upbringing in the Great Depression. In his words, "In early July when the corn was about three or four feet tall, a terrible storm swept across the mountains and valleys. The feeling I had was indescribable when I went to the field and saw literally every stalk of corn lying prostrate on the ground. My first thought was that all of the seeds and all of our labors had been wasted. I went home and told my family what had happened. My father, an experienced farmer, laughed and said, "Wait until the sun comes out and shines on the corn." I went to bed that night praying for the sun to shine all day long the next day. Sure enough it did. When I went to the field in the middle of the afternoon, the corn was standing erect and tall. Its very leaves seemed to be expressing thanks to the sun. I stood there and looked upon those shiny green leaves and thanked God. I have never forgotten this experience, because it impressed upon me firmly that one must never despair when [one] is down, and one must never think that storms are the end of life. More often they are the prelude to a happier and more responsive life." Living into our baptism means taking the personal and private sense of God, and holding it out, sharing it, being public about it. It reminds me of my first experience of call to ministry. I certainly understood God, and already had acknowledged my complete dependency upon Holy Spirit. But as I sat at a public forum listening to the current Night Minister and hospital chaplain Michael Hertz and Glenda Hope and Ruth Brinker, founder of Open Hand, I realized that these folk were doing what I wanted to do, and they were working with in the church.

It was as if I reached into my chest and pulled out my special private faith and showed it to the world. It was at that moment that I took another step toward living into my baptism. Living into our baptism means we are to be used by the Spirit to bless and strengthen one another.. to be generous, to be compassionate, to be faithful, not because we're religious over-achievers, but because we've learned that all of life is blessed by God's grace. It means that the power of baptism comes to break down barriers between people. We share a common relationship with Jesus Christ in which the old divisions and designations no longer apply. Baptism is not about being incorporated into the body with no intention of accepting and working with the other members of the body. As we are included alongside others, we realize that for the body to be healthy all must be transformed. As we are transformed, we are more likely to expand the circle of our love to include others as full partners in the church.

Living into our baptism means giving our lives to serving others. In one of his last speeches Martin Luther King Jr., said, "I'd like for somebody to say, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. "Maybe now, living into our baptisms, it is our turn to recommit to speaking up, to see where the dream has become a nightmare, yes, but also to point to where the dream is lived out, in all those people who make up this melting pot we call America. Maybe now it is our turn to speak up, to see how the Body of Christ needs, and indeed thrives on, diversity, not sameness. Maybe now, it is our turn to speak up, to see where the water of our ordinary lives can be transformed by God's grace into a rolling river of new life, new hopes, new dreams. Every one of you are claimed as God's beloved. You are called into a community of believers that will never abandon you. And out of that embrace, you are called to preach the good news, offer help to the poor and strength to the weak. You are called to accept God's embrace of you, and then live into God's vision of the world. May it be so.