

Baptism of the Lord, Sunday, January 13, 2019
Trinity United Methodist Church
Rev. Geri Hamlen

The Baptism of Jesus is described in all 4 of the Gospels...it's as though we had 4 different journalists reporting in 4 different newspapers. No 2 accounts are exactly alike and Luke's version is the only one that makes it perfectly clear that Jesus was baptized as one of many. There was a crowd at the River Jordan that day and here's what happened:

Reading from the Holy Bible Luke 3: 15 – 22

As the people were filled with expectation,
and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John the Baptist,
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, John proclaimed the good news to the people.

Sidebar: 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. **Back to the story:**

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.”
The words of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God

The Message

‘Whose Party is It?’

Pastor Geri

None of the 4 Gospels talk about what happened after the voice of God introduced Jesus as ‘my Son, the Beloved’ but it is often the case, now a days, that Baptism is followed by a party. Or a special meal...a gathering of friends and family. Those of us who were baptized as babies wouldn't remember our own baptisms and whether or not there was a party... but I remember when my son was baptized...it was the same day as my birthday!

I was part of a Divorce Recovery Group at one of the really big churches while still attending the UM Church in Northville. I invited my friends to the baptism which turned out to be a bit of a scramble because the Rev. hadn't told the Church secretary that the baptism was scheduled for that day. But she did put together a baptismal certificate. And the minister free-formed a baptism for little Tony. My friends showed up for worship with their kids. It all went smoothly and we went back to my condo for a pot-luck lunch and the kids got to play and that was a party with a ‘celebration of life’ kind of feel to it all.

A sense that no matter how tough the circumstances might be, no matter if the minister forgot or not...my friends had shown up. God showed up. My son and I were official...And now, each year on my birthday, I celebrate not only my entry into the world as a baby but I also am reassured about my son's entry into God's community and the seal of God's love on his life.
And that's still worth a party!

Not that my son, or many who are baptized as little ones, necessarily choose at this time in their lives to participate in God's church community.

Not that our baptized children, young or middle aged adults as they may be, are particularly attuned to the love of God working in their lives.

Or even interested in hearing about how the presence of God makes a difference to us who come to church and read the Bible and pray...am I right?

But we can be assured...God's steadfast love endures forever.

God's grace is at work in the lives of every human being, long, long ages and years and days before that particular person may ever be aware of it. That's how great is our God.

And when the time is right...whether it's an epiphany of joy or despair...everyone has a chance to open their hearts and their souls to accept the love of God.

And that's worth a party too!

So some of us may fret and worry about our uncommitted, uninvolved family members but Be not afraid for them. God's got them, and the whole world, in his hand.

Just like he had me.

Just like I trust he has my son.

At the same time, I know that this isn't an issue for all of you...some of you have very faithful grown children and it must be a joy to see them growing in their faith and participating in God's work in the world. It is actually the work of the church to provide opportunities and resources for people who want to draw closer to God. For people who want to know more about Jesus. For people who want to feel and follow the Holy Spirit in all they do.

The UM Church large, has a Mission, shared throughout the world...To make disciples of Jesus Christ/for the Transformation of the world.

I heard a speaker recently¹ discuss how there is a tendency in the UM church to charge full steam ahead with the Transform the world kind of thing. The Book of Resolutions. Social Creed. Petitions. Missions. UMCOR for heaven's sake. All valuable and all God inspired activities. But the contention of this speaker is that we tend to get a little unbalanced in favor of missions.

With a little bit of work, we can find a group of people who want to DO something.

It's a far greater challenge finding people who want to actively grow in their faith.

I can see what he is saying. We see with the Light at the Inn homeless shelter and our own Community Meal...there are people who could care less about God, who don't know Jesus except as a swear word...but they still want to make the world a better place...one meal at a time. One warm place to sleep at a time. And I respect them for that. We all try to teach our kids that helping someone out is the best thing to do...

It's harder to find people, inside or outside the church, who want to take the time and to focus any energy towards growing in their faith...to mature as disciples of Jesus.

Being a disciple isn't easy. The world keeps changing. What we thought we knew as kids seems to be turned upside down in this particular day and age. As followers of Jesus we all need help with understanding and applying his teachings from long ago to the situations we face today.

In a society and culture that has less and less respect for organized religion, we all need help in figuring out how to address the indifference and even contempt that grows with each Church scandal and pastoral disgrace.

I was in Super One early on Friday a.m., buying gift cards with some of the Brother's Keeper money that you all gave to the Mission of the Month last month and got to talking to a man who thought I was buying lottery tickets. When I told him I was a minister at the Methodist Church on Carpenter he said... 'Don't get me started on Church...' But it was too late. I'd gotten him started! And he went on at some length about being Catholic and the horror show of priests and children and Bishops... We both finished at the register and walked out together... me assuring him that God never intended for those horrible things to happen. He saying, 'I'm never going back!' I said... look for the good, the beautiful, the joy and that's where God wants us to be. He said, 'The joy I see today is you buying food cards for people who are hungry.' We laughed together about that and went on with the day.

There is no doubt that faithful and baptized Catholics are experiencing a crisis of faith around the predatory behavior of priests and corporate cover-up... a crisis that makes our Methodist battlefield on human sexuality look like a day in the park. Do you ever wonder how you, as a friend or a neighbor or a relative can be a voice of comfort in those kinds of hurting places? It's hard to know, isn't it?

We need the help and wisdom and experience of our friends in Christ to help us with situations like that. As the baptized followers of Jesus we are participating in a life-long project to grow and to deepen and to put into words what it means to love God through Jesus Christ in all the areas of our lives... so we can have something to say to our friends who are hurting.

Bible Study... Book study... Adult SS... Faith Formation Workshops... Tender Heart Worship are all opportunities for you and your friends and family. They are designed in some small part at least for the baptized and the baffled. To help us figure out how to do God's work in the world.

There are some pretty standard images and prototypes used to describe faith development. Some come for the educational field. Some come from poetry. Some come from visions. I bet we are all familiar with the concept of a Faith Journey. A sacred journey to draw closer to God. Native American Methodists enhance this concept by adding the Vision Quest practice from their traditional practices.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk who wrote a best-selling autobiography about his spiritual journey... yes, it was a best seller in 1949 according to Time Magazine, in which he used the image of a Seven Story Mountain to trace the stages of his growing awareness of God.

Saint Teresa of Avila in the 1500s wrote a book that endures to this day called the Mansions. Taking off on Jesus' words... In my father's house there are many mansions she describes seven stages, events, visions that drew her closer and closer to God.

More currently... women describe the stages of faith development in terms of Quilting... each of us has a quilt square that we are working on which is then combined with those of the people around us. Or braiding... we each have a thread of life with knots and tangles that are woven together in community.

Karen Armstrong may be an author some of you are familiar with... she has written amazing books about world religions after being a nun for 7 years of her life. She describes her growth in understanding the holy and the divine in terms of The Spiral Staircase.

So many images and metaphors and descriptions have been used and maybe you have your own. And that's a good thing and worth talking about... so do come to one of the Book studies, workshops or Bible studies so we can learn from each other.

During this Season of Epiphany... through January and February, we here at Trinity are going to use an image also, to deepen our relationship with God and to grow in our faith. For us, I'm saying: Growing in faith is like going to a party with Jesus.

No...I'm not borrowing from those who are far wiser and more experienced than I am. There is no author, article or guide for this particular concept but I read through the Bible last year and have started reading it again this year and I keep reading about parties.

This week Abraham made quite a party for the 3 strangers who came calling to tell him and Sarah that they were going to be an octogenarian parents. We read Psalm 5 last week ...using the Message interpretation, tells us:

But you'll welcome us with open arms when we run for cover to you.
Let the party last all night! Stand guard over our celebration.
You are famous, God, for welcoming God-seekers,
for decking us out in delight.

We know that Jesus enjoyed parties...weddings and banquets, celebrations for lost coins and an adult son who came home at last after wandering far from family and faith. There must be something in all the Bible stories about parties that can help us as we navigate our own personal faith formation this year and every year.

Remember Easter 2018. Last year. It was on April Fool's Day and we explored the theme of 'Lighten Up!' Look for joy. I made some notes back then that I ran across the other day: A biographer of C.S. Lewis wrote: 'The preparation for the pleasures and joy of heaven must be rehearsed here on earth.'ⁱⁱ

What if Heaven is a great big, joy-filled, rock'n'roll, dance all night and laugh all day kind of party? We need to be ready for that, right???

And from the time of his Baptism, Jesus has been showing us the way. The Kingdom of God is near he said over and over again. Maybe that means the party is right around the corner. Right up in the Jr. Worship room or our Fellowship Hall.

And from the time of each of your Baptisms, you have been called to, invited to live the party that God created for us here on earth.

Whose party is it? Of course, it's God's party.

And in our earnestness and seriousness it is far, far too easy for us to forget that we can live a life that's more like a party and less like a dreary, middle of winter exercise. A life that reflects the love, the light and the joy of Jesus.

Maybe if our adult children saw us having fun at church, they might be a little more curious about what's going on around here...

So look for the party and remember that you are invited. Remember your Baptism and be thankful that you are invited to God's party. While the choir sings, you are welcome to come forward and dip your hands in the water provided here. I've warmed it up. There's a little frankincense oil in there to make it smell good...remember that frankincense is supposed to maybe help with arthritis...Let the water here this a.m. remind you that you have been invited to God's great party of believers. You can take a minute to kneel and pray.

You can leave any prayer cards here as well and we will move into prayer after you have all had a chance remember your baptism and be thankful for the invitation to the party!

ⁱ Lewis Center class on early Methodist Class system, Dr. David Lowes Watson. www.Lewisonlinelearning.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Lindovall, Terry, Surprised by Laughter: The Comic World of C.S. Lewis, Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1996, p. 126.