

Luke 3:1-22

Great expectations have always been a part of human history. Charles Dickens wrote an entire book with that title. Anyone can relate to looking forward to or anticipating something. In Luke's Gospel, people were anticipating a Messiah and wondering if John the Baptist could be he.

One of the blessings or advantages of the Narrative Lectionary is exemplified in today's Gospel. We have been using the Narrative Lectionary rather than the Revised Common Lectionary or RCL for the past three years to determine our Sunday readings. In the RCL, this story from Luke is spread over three years, a few verses each year, so the flow of the story, along with two omitted verses, is lost. This story is an important part of the faith story, so we need to spend some time exploring it in its *entirety*. Luke has told us about the conception and meaning of John the Baptist. Now he tells us about the ministry of the grown-up John, who went into all regions around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

Luke has built up the great expectations in his Gospel so far, by relating the pre-history of Jesus, his birth, early trip to Jerusalem, and the appearance of the Baptist. In this passage, however, the expectations of the people are shattered without their knowing it. They had probably been expecting an apocalyptic messiah figure that would restore their political fortunes. But, instead, they got an apocalyptic

figure who *redefined* apocalypse, the messiah, and their expectations.

First, the Baptist dampens the anticipations of his listeners when he mentions the “wrath to come.” *Brood of snakes* or *vipers* as some translations have it. *Axe at the root of the trees*. Don’t take more than your due! Repent! Come and be baptized! John is an interesting fellow. And why was he so popular?

He is by no means gentle with his listeners when he predicts fire for those trees that bear no fruit. If they thought that John was looking forward to a serious drubbing of the Romans or the traditional enemies of the Jews, they would be sorely disappointed. He is more concerned with the personal spiritual transformation within Israel itself rather than a political rebellion.

John first replies to the expectations of the people by telling them that someone greater than he is coming. This message is shared by all three synoptic gospels. The Baptist mentions the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, perhaps a reference to Pentecost later in Acts, or Jesus’ powerful life and teachings. Every baptism in the Lutheran church is a baptism of the Holy Spirit. That is why it is taken so seriously. It is a miracle each time it occurs.

Today we hear Luke’s version of Jesus’ baptism - in full - not chopped into three short instalments. A comparison of the different versions of Jesus’ baptism yields several differences in Luke’s account. Moreover, the baptism of Jesus in Luke points to a major theme for the Gospel, but also for Epiphany - what happens when what is revealed is not what people expect or want and even reject?

Noticeable about Luke's account of Jesus' baptism - I wonder if anyone actually noticed it - is that John is nowhere to be found. *"John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people. John also publicly criticized Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for marrying Herodias, his brother's wife, and for many other wrongs he had done. So Herod put John in prison, adding this sin to his many others."* These verses were omitted by the three-year cyclic RCL. Not only was the story chopped up - but most important - revealing verses were left out.

These verses are essential because they tell us what happened to John. He's in prison. What might this overlooked detail reveal to us about Jesus' baptism in Luke's Gospel? First, since John is locked up in prison, he is not present at the baptism of Jesus, nor does he baptize Jesus. Well, then, who does?

Second, the reason John is in prison foreshadows Jesus' rejection in Nazareth. John has told Herod the truth about his life. Herod doesn't like the truth and gets rid of the evidence. Third, while John had a major role in the first chapters of the Gospel: the story of his mother and father, his birth, his relationship to Jesus. Now that Jesus will be baptized, it's just Jesus, and there will be no more confusing the two.

John is not the Messiah and the first clue, in distinguishing between Jesus and John is, oddly, baptism. Jesus' baptism will be different and Jesus will baptize differently. John's baptism is just with water. But, Jesus? Well, that's with the Holy

Spirit and fire - a connection to Pentecost. The Spirit takes centre stage here and reminds us of the unique function of the Spirit in Luke-Acts. Reading the Gospel of Luke through the lens of the Spirit's role generates a sampling of the Spirit's presence: Conception; Magnificat; Zechariah; Leads Jesus into the wilderness; Empowers Jesus' ministry; Jesus rejoices in the Spirit; Conferred through prayer; Jesus commits his Spirit to God; Luke ends his Gospel with Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit; Pentecost.

Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit appear to be the only ones present at the baptism, foreshadowing a similar moment at the crucifixion, a "last word" found only in Luke's Gospel. There is promise in the presence of the Spirit here and at the end of Jesus' life that will be true for all believers.

While Jesus was being baptized and praying, the heavens were opened. Praying is very important in Luke's Gospel. It signifies Jesus' deep devotion to God, the Father, and also signals important events, such as praying in the Garden at Gethesmane before the arrest.

Two elements of Luke's story stand out. First, baptism is about identity. The voice from heaven is addressed to Jesus in the first person: "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy." Baptism teaches us who we are - God's beloved children - and confers upon us the promise of God's unconditional love. In an era when so many of the traditional elements of identity-construction have been diminished – frequent changing of jobs and careers, multiple residences rather than

growing up and living in a single community, fewer families remaining intact – leaves a craving to figure out who we are. In response to this craving and need, baptism reminds us that we discover who we are in relation to *whose* we are - God's beloved children. We belong to God's family.

An ancient Christian catechism describes baptism as a “visible sign of invisible grace.” By the grace of God we are surrounded and upheld every day. Martin Luther was plagued at times by a sense of unworthiness and despair. To drive back those demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read, “Remember, you have been baptized.” Often he would touch his forehead and say, “Martin, you have been baptized.”

When feeling despair or hopelessness or uncertainty, try touching your own forehead, and reminding yourself that you are a child of God, a beloved child of God. God chooses to bring us into the world and God's grace claims us and reclaims us, over and over and over again.

An interesting incident occurred following an infant baptism. On the way home after worship, the older brother of the baptized infant cried all the way home. Three times his dad asked him what he was crying about. Finally, he answered, “The preacher said he wanted us to be brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys.”

Whatever your feelings about the best time for Baptism may be, all Christian traditions emphasize that it is God's work. Remember that in Luke's account, John

does **not** baptize Jesus. The *Holy Spirit* baptizes Jesus, the same Spirit that baptizes us. Baptism, then, is wholly God's work so that we may have confidence that no matter how often we fall short or fail, nothing that we do, or fail to do, can remove the identity that God conveys as a gift.

The relationship which we have with God, is the one relationship in life that we can't mess up, precisely because we did not establish it. We can neglect his relationship, we can deny it, run away from it, ignore it, but we cannot destroy it, for God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go. In an age when so many relationships are fragile and tattered, it may come as good news that this primary relationship remains solid and intact no matter what. Trusting that this relationship is in God's hands, we are freed to give ourselves wholly and completely to the other important relationships in our lives – family - church - community - ministry - mission.

We who are baptized struggle just like everyone else to be decent human beings. We are no more or less tempted than anyone else to be less than God created us to be and gives us the spiritual power to choose a higher and better way. From our baptism onward, we live inside the promise that we will have a strength that comes from another world enabling us to will and to work for God's good pleasure. I love the thought of image of God standing on a ladder somewhere or even better, sitting on a star in the heavens, saying, "Do you see my girl down there? Do you see my boy down there? I am so proud of them. She's not perfect, he's not perfect - but they are mine ." The thought should fill us all with great joy.

In his book, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts, " he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well boy, you are a child of.....' and then he paused. When he spoke again, he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life." The elderly man gave Craddock his name. Craddock recalled that as a child he heard how twice the people of Tennessee had elected as governor of their state, a fellow who had been born out of wedlock.

Children of God, remember that you have been baptized and rejoice! Through baptism we are made new with Jesus and with one another. Remember whose you are and glorify and enjoy your relationship with our awesome God.

Amen.