

January 9, 2022. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Help us, Holy God, to connect to your word anew. Open the Scriptures to us in a way that is life-giving. Encourage us to listen to the message your Spirit makes known in word and worship. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 3, verses 15 - 17 and 21 - 22. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, **16** 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. **17** 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.” **21** Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, **22** 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 word of the lord. Thanks be to God.

Today is baptism of the lord Sunday - this first Sunday after Epiphany. A day where we celebrate not only Christ's baptism, but also our own - the baptism we share with Christ.

The story of Christ being baptized is one of the few stories that is in all the gospels. From a narrative standpoint, the event functions as the transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to Christ's ministry.

As John baptizes Christ, John's work to prepare the way for the Lord is done, and Christ's ministry has just begun.

As with all stories that occur in all four Gospels, it's worth diving into the similarities and differences in each Gospel writer's telling of the same story. For each reveal a different nature of Christ's baptism and Christ himself - helping us to paint a fuller picture of Christ our King.

And there are a lot of similarities in this story. For instance, all four Gospels have John the Baptist baptize Jesus at the river Jordan. All four have John declare something along the lines of someone who is more powerful than I is coming and he will baptize you with the holy spirit.

All four have John say he is not worthy to baptize Christ. And all four mention the holy spirit coming down from heaven as a dove to Jesus.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke - a voice comes down from heaven as well and that voice explicitly declares Jesus as God's son - the beloved. with whom God is well pleased.

Now, there are a few differences in Luke's version of the story that stand apart from the other Gospels. The first is the role of the crowd. In no other account does the crowd even play a role or is mentioned. But in Luke's account the feelings of the crowd begin the story.

The crowd was filled with expectation - questioning whether or not John was the Messiah. And then when Jesus shows up to be baptized he essentially waits in line.

He waits his turn to be baptized after the crowd. Verse 21 tells us that all the other people were baptized before Christ. No other Gospel has Jesus explicitly baptized in the midst of others.

John the Baptist's role in Luke's account is also different. The lectionary omits verses 18 to 20 for today's text. And this is most likely done because verses 18 to 20 seem out of place - these verses (which are in the middle of the story of John baptizing Christ) are a sort of side note to tell us, the reader, that King Herod imprisons John.

It's perhaps done to lessen John the Baptist's role or importance in Christ's baptism.

And that's another difference for Luke - the story of Christ's baptism doesn't really seem to focus on the baptism. Jesus being baptized is mentioned in passing in verse 21, instead the height of the story is the revelation of Jesus' identity as God's son.

But the most explicit difference in Luke's account is prayer. Jesus prays after he is baptized. No other gospel mentions prayer or has Jesus praying.

But for Luke - it's not until AFTER Jesus is baptized and is praying that the heavens open up, the holy spirit descends, and God declares Jesus the son of God, the beloved. With whom God is well pleased.

Luke's gospel as a whole, is best known as one that speaks to the outsider. It is those on the outside - women, poor, orphans, Gentiles. In Luke's gospel, more than any other, that God shows favor.

But prayer, too, plays a special role in the gospel of Luke like no other Gospel. Particularly Jesus as a practitioner of prayer and one who regularly sought places to pray.

He prays here at his baptism, but at other extraordinary moments of his life too: his bodily transfiguration on a mountain, the appointment of his 12 disciples, and when Peter confesses him as God's messiah.

Prayer is also an important part of Jesus' teaching, he incorporates the importance of prayer into many parables.

Overall, prayer is a central feature in Jesus' life, faith, and ministry in the Gospel of Luke. Thus it makes sense that at his baptism Christ prays.

His first prayer in the Gospel of Luke, this prayer where God reveals Jesus' identity to Jesus, begins his ministry.

It is the transition from the ministry of John the Baptist who prepares the way, to Jesus Christ - the way. A beauty unique to Luke.

I think the act of prayer, is something that is both comforting to us and intimidating. Something that feels near to us, yet so far away.

Human beings across all time, all religions, all humanity - have been praying to something greater than themselves. And I imagine they will continue to do so long after we are gone.

Perhaps that in and of itself is both comforting and intimidating, near to us, yet far away.

For surely I can pray if billions of people across all time and space have before, but then again what's wrong with me when prayer feels so hard if billions of people across all time and space have done it before.

Perhaps this paradox comes from the boxes and walls we like to form around what we deem as the act of prayer.

If I think back, I think my first understanding or image of prayer as a child was that you were supposed to kneel down by your bed and say the now I lay me down to sleep prayer, before going to sleep each night.

And that's not wrong. that is prayer. But prayer is so much more, and manifests itself in so many ways.

Just as the beauty of humanity is in its diversity: that we can be so similar yet so different - so too it is with prayer.

The beauty of prayer is in its diversity. We each can pray so similarly, but also have the freedom to pray so differently, unique to each of us.

For at its core prayer is our personal relationship with God. Is that not the core of Jesus' prayer at his baptism?

Jesus begins to pray and the heavens open up and for the first time Jesus knows his own identity as God's son.

Luke has told us, the reader, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God many times thus far, through the angel's revelation to Mary, to Joseph, to the Shepherds, but not yet to Christ himself.

Through Christ's prayer - we can assume that this revelation came to Christ alone, as he likely found a private place to pray.

The heavens opened up and the spirit descends just for him - just so he knows who he is, and the love and pride God has for him.

The season of epiphany celebrates our want and need to seek God's self revelation to the world in Jesus Christ - so it's fitting that in this first Sunday after Epiphany, Jesus has the revelation of his own identity as God's son - his own personal relationship to God through the heavens opening up - a grand act that in and of itself is an epiphany that reveals God here on earth.

And in each Gospel's account of Christ's baptism we see this epiphany - the heavens open and for a moment, that which separates heaven from earth is gone, and God is revealed here on earth.

But in Luke's account that we have read here today - we see that prayer is an epiphany in and of itself.

Our own personal relationship with God, the heavens opened and God is within our reach, revealed here in this world just to us.

And if that feels both comforting and intimidating, near yet so far - perhaps we need not get lost in a formula of prayer, but hold truth in its core.

That when we pray, we do so knowing that we are God's own. God loves us. And despite the brokenness of this world, I think that God is proud of us.

After graduating from college, I spent some time backpacking in New Zealand with a friend.

And in our first trek there, a few days in we had ventured so far into the wilderness that no city lights polluted the night sky. And that night the sky was crystal clear, and the stars shone so bright I could barely believe my eyes.

I could see the dust of the milk way, and shooting star after shooting star. I stared at that sky so long my neck began to hurt from gazing up.

When I think of Jesus baptism, and the heavens opening up, I think of that night sky. And when I saw that sky and marveled at the fact that the God who created that created me too, I felt my own identity as God's own. God's beloved.

Perhaps Luke wants us to know that moments like that, too, are prayer. That moments like that too celebrate our baptism, the baptism we share with Christ, our own epiphany.

Amen.