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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

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Baptism of the Lord

“Baptized Into”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-23 and Galatians 3:26-29

We are in the season of Epiphany. It is the season of light, of seeing clearly, of understanding Jesus for who he really is, the true light of God shining for all people.

It is the season when even though the nights are long and the days are short, in spite of the fact that there are many bleak winter days, that we ponder and proclaim with John that the light has come into the world and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Winter in Ohio helps us to understand this mystery. Just when you think you can’t stand another gloomy day, just when you think the sun has packed up and moved to Florida with the snowbirds, we get a brisk clear sunny day with light so brilliant, so pure, the sky so blue, that we don’t even mind the cold.

On those days, you can see clearly. But for good or bad, the purity of the light shows just how dirty your windows really are…even the ones you just cleaned.

When I think about the beauty of the sunshine and the ability of the glass to let the light shine through, and then the dirt and dust that collects and begins to block the light, it makes me think of us and our relationship with God.

God has made us like glass—pure, strong, meant for transparency so that the light of God’s holiness can shine through us. God has made us like glass, strong when the right thickness, held in the frame of God’s love and grace, even able to weather the hardest storms…but fragile, easily broken when we’re out on our own. But made like glass for clarity…made for light to shine through.

The season of Epiphany is about the moments in life when the curtains and blinds are up, the windows clean, and the brilliant light of holy revelation of who Jesus is and therefore who we are streams in and we see clearly, at least for a moment. And because of that we are called to a new reality, a new truth.

This is what happens in our Scripture today. It is the story of Jesus’ baptism as told by Luke. He gives us a very clear glimpse of who Jesus is, complete with the heavens opening up, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and the voice of God telling us who Jesus is. It’s pretty clear.

And yet part of our human condition is that we have these moments of extreme clarity and insight as to who God is, who Jesus is, who we are, and then we forget again. The clouds roll back in and we forget just how bright and blue the sky was, how pure and radiant that light was.

While everyone is being baptized, Jesus is baptized too. This is before anyone really knows who he is, before he has begun his public ministry. John the baptizer, his cousin, wild and wooly, larger than life is all the rage.

And he stands there in the water, not attracting much attention, praying. And as he does, the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit descends in a way that was clear, embodied, and yet like a dove—gentle, quiet, and graceful. And God’s voice speaks, claiming, and affirming Jesus as his Son, the one who is beloved, in whom he is well pleased.

Mark makes this a big deal. God is on the loudspeaker and everyone can hear and see what is going on. But Luke describes it differently. As he describes it, it is a private moment between Jesus and God. Others might be around, but they really don’t seem to notice. No one looks or points.

I’m glad we have both versions. As much as I like the drama and the significance of Mark’s description, Luke’s resonates with me. So often this is what an epiphany is like. We hear God’s voice clearly. We experience a moment that changes our life forever. We look around expecting everyone else to notice. And yet, there they go, on with their business. We could be disappointed, figuring as we do sometimes that it’s only important or real if others see it too, or we could treasure it, for it is a gift that God has given to us, personally. We can hear over and over that God has given that gift to all of us, but it is when we hear that voice as if it was only speaking to us, that we really get it—Jesus was born for me. Jesus lived for me. Jesus died for me. Jesus rose for me.

Jesus was the only one who needed to hear God’s voice in this moment, to experience the Holy Spirit descending on him and filling him. This was what would give him the affirmation, the confirmation, the courage to begin his ministry that would go all the way to the cross, and beyond.

The profound thing about this moment is that Jesus hasn’t done anything yet. No miracles, no teaching. But God still speaks to him, claims him as his beloved child in whom he is well pleased. God’s opinion of him is not based on what he has done or hasn’t done, it’s not even based on what he will do. God’s opinion is based on who he is.

This is profound, isn’t it? It is such a different way of thinking to our normal way of thinking about things. In the world, in our minds and in our relationships, we think that we accomplish and achieve and therefore are connected, loved, and favored. Or, we fail and are then rejected, not loved, and not favored.

In Jesus’ baptism, we see not just who he is, but that God’s way is different. And that this same truth extends to us. Jesus identity is based in his relationship with God, not in what he accomplishes on earth. Before he does anything and no matter what he does, he is still God’s beloved Son in whom God is well pleased.

And this truth extends to us. Our identity is based in our relationship with God, not in what we accomplish or don’t accomplish here on earth. It’s not about what we do, that’s works righteousness. It’s about what God does and what God says, and God says the same things to us in our baptism that he says to Jesus: “You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased.” You can’t earn this. You can’t flunk out of this. You can run away from it but that will not change it. This is the truth of who you are.

This is one of the reasons we baptize infants. It is a powerful reminder that baptism isn’t about us and what we’ve done. It is about God and God’s love for us, God’s grace for us, claiming us in Jesus Christ.

When we know who we are, that we are God’s beloved children in whom God is well pleased, regardless of whether we succeed or fail, regardless of what we do or achieve, then we are freed to be and do as we live out the truth of who we are. It gives us courage to live in the truth and to help others live in this truth as well.

This becomes the model for how we see the world and how we see others as well. Jesus, as he met people, saw them not for their accomplishments or failures, not for their gender, their status of clean or unclean. He saw them as children of God, beloved and delighted in. And because he saw them this way and treated them this way, they realized the truth of who they were and began to live into it.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians puts it this way, “You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew not Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

“You were baptized into Christ…” That means we are baptized into Jesus, into his identity and his mission, into the truth that he lives out. We are baptized into his ministry of sacrificial love and service.

And so as we remember our baptism, we are invited to hold our lives up to the light and so see the places where his light and love, his truth and shining through the glass of our lives so that we don’t look like us but we look like him. As we hold our lives up to his light, we will see places where his truth is shining clearly through us, where we are experiencing love and joy, where we are loving and serving others. But as we hold our lives up to the light, we will see that there are places where that image of Christ is distorted or dimmed. The grime of the world, the dust of our expectations and judgements, the splatters of our disappointments, and the smudges of guilt are all over the glass of our lives.

And so we need to come to the water of grace again, remembering the deep truth of our baptism, that all of this is just on the surface. It will wash off. Sometimes it takes a little elbow grease, sometimes a little goo gone, but it will wash. For the truth of who we are is what we see in Jesus. We are God’s beloved, made like that strong glass, framed in God’s love so that the light of Jesus might shine through us.

So today in these moments, let us remember our baptism--not so much a remembering of the moment of our baptism as much as entering into a time of deep knowing of the truth of our baptism, that we are baptized into Jesus Christ. We are baptized into the one who is beloved. We are baptized into the one who pleases God, we are baptized into his mission and his ministry of sacrificial love and service, of living the truth of God’s grace and love.