“After the Baptism”
Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter
Sunday, January 13, 2013
Scripture – Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Do you wonder why Jesus decided to be baptized? Evidently the gospel writers felt a bit uneasy about it, as did the early church who professed faith in a savior without sin. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that Jesus was indeed baptized. The first two gospels make it clear that cousin John baptized Jesus, and Matthew even suggests that John tried to deter Jesus saying, “Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!” In one early gospel that did not make the final cut into the Holy Canon, Jesus denies that he needs to repent. He seems to get baptized to please his mother. Goodness knows some baptisms occur today to satisfy parents, or appease grandparents.

If Jesus did not go to John to repent of his sin, maybe he chose baptism as a way of turning toward God, of recommitting his life to the Most High. Some scholars propose that in submitting to baptism Jesus joined the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem. Through baptism he allied himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them, Jesus took his place beside us and among us.

Luke says little about Jesus’ baptism, and even throws into question whether his cousin John officiated. If you look back at verses 18-20 which Ed skipped over because they are not in the lectionary text, you will find that John may not even have been around. In these verses we learn that Herod became angry with John and threw John into prison when the prophet charged Herod with stealing his brother’s wife. Was John already in prison when Jesus was baptized? It is really unclear.

Luke gives no juicy details regarding our Lord’s baptism and recounts it in only six words, “when Jesus also had been baptized.” However, Luke shows a keen interest in what happens after the baptism. He tells us that after the baptism Jesus began praying. And while he was praying, he heard a voice and saw a vision — the declaration from on high that he was God’s Beloved, and the descent of God’s Spirit in the form of a dove. The voice and the vision punctuated the baptismal event, signaling for Jesus his identity and calling, and impelling him to go public after thirty years of invisibility. Henceforth Jesus understood his mission: to proclaim by word and action, through his every being, God’s unconditional love for all people everywhere.

What about us? What difference does our baptism make – in our lives and in the life of God’s world? We live in this “after the baptism” period, and hopefully (if we were baptized as babies) this time spans at least 7 or 8 decades. Jesus lived only three more years, but scripture tells us that after his baptism, He:
proclaimed the kingdom of heaven,  
called disciples to follow him,  
ate with sinners and outcasts,  
taught the crowds in parables,  
challenged the religious leaders of the day,  
healed the sick,  
and embodied God’s abundant grace.

According to the gospel writers Jesus’ baptism was a pivotal event, for his ministry and teachings and trials and triumphs - and almost all that make us remember Jesus - took place after his baptism.

In today’s passage Jesus’ epiphany occurred as he was praying, and Luke continues to highlight Jesus’s practice of prayer throughout his gospel. Jesus prayed repeatedly. After preaching and teaching to the multitudes, Jesus would withdraw and pray. Before calling his disciples, he went out to the mountain and during the night he prayed. As he weighed the decision to ask his disciples who they thought he was, he prayed. Do you remember why he went up that mountain with Peter, James and John? You got it: to pray. Prayer was so integral to his life that his disciples finally asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

On the night of his arrest, after sharing that last Passover with his friends, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, and prayed. Even as he died, Jesus prayed. Luke does not mention the tormented prayer of lament as Jesus hung on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” However, he does cite two other final prayers from a dying Christ – a prayer of intercession for his enemies, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,” and a prayer of relinquishment, “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul suggests that Christ continues to pray for us…! But that’s another sermon.

Since our baptism, have we become people of prayer? People who continually turn to God for guidance? Do we seek to grow in God’s wisdom and be filled with God’s love and grace? If you want to become more Christ-like, try pumping up your prayer life.

Say “thank you, God for a new day,” when you wake up in the morning.
Pause and express gratitude before you eat a meal.
Whisper the names of those for whom you have promised prayers – as you sit at a stoplight, or fold laundry, or jog through your neighborhood.
Take time to be still, to know God’s abiding presence, and to listen for that still small Voice.
If the voice shames you or tells you that you are worthless, then it is not God, but more likely that Critical Parent psychologists help us purge.
But if the Voice addresses you as “Precious” or “Beloved,” sit with it, and pay attention.

Arlo D. Duba, a retired worship professor and hymn writer, describes baptism as “the root sacrament” basic to worship and to life. Certainly baptism gives us roots –

- Initiating us into a community of faith, the Church, the body of Christ,
- Identifying us as Children of God, followers of the Way of Christ,
- Confirming the indwelling of God’s Spirit.

John the Baptist reminds us, “I baptize you with water; but the One greater than I will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”
Some days we may sense the Spirit glowing faintly as an ember, and other times it may feel like a Holy Hotflash, surging toward combustion, burning brightly as a flame.

Some days we fear the Spirit has completely drained out of us, but then we feel the welling up of a few drops … pooling in the corner of our eyes. Thankfully, we experience times the Spirit billows up inside us and overflows in joy and service and compassion. Growing up out of our roots and bearing fruit of the Spirit is a process. Discerning God’s call and experiencing God’s claim on our life occurs over a lifetime. The journey along Christ’s Way clearly entails fits and starts, twists and turns, road blocks and detours, stretches of desolate, dry desert as well as verdant fields of faith. Moreover, we may experience any number of new beginnings.

The question remains: “What difference does baptism make?” It reminds us that we belong to God AND to one another. Therefore, wherever you find yourself on your post-baptism trek – floating aimlessly in a lifeboat, slogging through quicksand or mud, creeping through a dark valley, trying to read the trail in a dense forest – take heart. And remember: you do not travel alone, but in community. We need each other for support and encouragement, for care and consolation, as together we remember who and Whose we are, and [what is expected of us.] We have a home here, where we take our places at God’s table and grow strong on God’s food; never to give up on ourselves, but always – in what we say and what we do – to proclaim the good news of God’s unconditional and unconquerable love for all people.

Thankfully, like Jesus, we have everything we need: that is, the Holy Spirit. Some days it may feel like God’s well of grace will run dry, but it won’t. Some days it may seem like the fire has gone out of the heart, but it hasn’t. Be patient. Wait for the Lord. For God has promised to be with us always – even when we feel alone or abandoned, paralyzed by grief, riddled with worry, burdened with fear. Watch. Pray. Listen.

There is a Voice
   calling over tumult of our frenzied days,
   awakening us from our deepest dreams,
   and whispering across the wind in the wilderness of life,
   “You are my Beloved. I am always with you.”

NOTES

2. Ibid
3. Ibid