

Burning, Baptism and Being With
January 12, Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
CONKLIN

My mom tells this delightful story—as you can see, it’s a little dated. *“We have three grandchildren, two granddaughters, Janelle and Seraphina and a grandson, Jonas. Jonas was 14 in October; Janelle will be 17 next week (I have no idea how that happened so fast!). Seraphina is 6. We love each one dearly.*

Some years ago, when Jonas was in elementary school, he won an award for academic achievement. We were there to see it presented. Walking out to the parking lot afterwards, I gave him a hug and said, “You’re my favorite grandson.” He gave me a look and said, “Grandma, I’m your only grandson!” I gave him another hug, and replied “Yes, you are and you’re still my favorite.” He just shook his head.

We tell our only child Seraphina this same joke all the time. She replies that I’m her favorite mom. The theologian Augustine wrote: *“God loves us each as if we were the only one God has.”* God loves each of us as if we were an only child. Or as a sticker someone gave me put it: *Jesus loves you—but I’m his favorite!*

Today is the second Sunday in the Epiphany season. It’s also known as Baptism of the Lord Sunday. We remember what Jesus’ baptism meant for him. We remember what our baptism means for us. It marks us with God’s love, and our mandates our ministry and mission.

John was preaching in the wilderness. Many came to hear him and be baptized. Jesus came from Galilee. John baptized him. Each of the Gospels offers this scene. In one of my Course of Study classes we were asked to read all four accounts of Jesus’ baptism and compare them. When we “*mash*” the stories together, we miss the unique details each writer offers. Mark’s addition is that the heavens were “***torn apart***” when the Spirit descended.

Luke uses the word open; talks about John and fire. Fire and water. It harkens back to our other two readings for today; first from ***Isaiah 43. But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.***

43:2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." You are my favored one. It's crucial to note that at this point in his ministry, Jesus hasn't done anything. He simply presents himself before God. He opens himself to receive God's gift. *You are the one I love*. It's a word of pure grace.

Those same words are spoken to us and about us. It isn't the act of baptism that makes us "*beloved*" (a favorite) in God's eyes. We already are. Baptism is first and foremost God's act. God chooses to love and claim us. Baptism names and recognizes our sin, our brokenness, our less than loving ways. It tells us we're loved in spite of. Our relationship with God isn't dependent on what we do or fail to do. It's a gift that we can neglect, deny, ignore, or "refuse to open". BUT: we can't ruin it. God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go.

That's the first promise we remember and reclaim today. We're the sons and daughters God has chosen to love. We're beloved children. Nothing in life or death, can change, or erase that truth.

In the rom-com My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding. Toulou, a girl from a Greek family, falls in love with a non-Greek man, Ian Miller. Her father Gus, believes everything good in the world comes from the Greeks and a spray of Windex will take care of every problem. He won't allow the marriage. Toulou's mother, persuades him but only if

Ian is baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church. Ian takes his instruction (which is extensive) and is baptized.

In one scene Toula and her brother Nick are talking. Nick turns to her and says, "It's not so bad, huh?" Toula, who has considerable self-esteem issues, replies in horror, "Are you kidding? Any minute now he's going to look at me and go, 'Yeah, right. You're so not worth this'." Nick replies, "Yes, you are".

"Yes, you are". God says it not only the day we're baptized. God wants us to hear it again every time we see and participate in a baptism. Even more than that-- to hear it every time we take a shower, walk in the rain, touch water, play in a pool, dip in the ocean or even wash our hands. God wants us to know: *"You're worth it. You're so worth it"*. Accepting that fundamental truth about ourselves we reach out to accept and embrace God's other *"favorite children"*. **We receive the gift of baptism; we do the work of baptism.**

In baptism we're claimed by God. We're also claimed for God. It sends us also. Bishop William Willimon puts it clearly: *"... baptism is each Christian's ordination into the priesthood of Christ; each Christian's commissioning to share in Christ's work in the world.*

That's the second part. Peter and Jon live it out in Acts reading.

8:14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 8:15 The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit 8:16(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). 8:17 Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Our baptism ritual opens by declaring, *"we're incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation"*. We're made part of God's work to **restore, renew and redeem** the world. Our part is to witness to God's presence and do God's work of love, justice, and mercy in the

world. Our United Methodist teaching states it clearly. Baptism is a gift and a task.

*What follows are known as "the Renunciations". Call them the four "R's" of our baptismal vows. We're to **"renounce, reject, and repent"**. "Renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, repent of our sin" (our part in it all). We're to "resist evil, injustice and oppression" in all their forms. Baptism calls us to a way of living that confesses Christ, trusts his grace, and serves him above all else. It's grounded in God's grace and love. Our response to it are actions on behalf of others. **We can't separate the two.***

Rev. Dr. Faith Conklin explains: Simply put it means ordering our living to be more like Jesus. It means asking what he wants us to do here and now and then doing it. As one person put it: "We move from the font to the frontlines". We engage the world with God's grace and mercy. We work for justice and peace. As Diane Roth wrote: We're "emissaries of the living God... to plant seeds of hope, healing and life." We are loved—unconditionally, unreservedly, unendingly. We make love our witness; our way of being with one another. Through it all, we trust that God who raises us from the baptismal waters will, at our end, raise us from death to new life. In the days in between we live as disciples of the living Christ.

The final reminder is that we don't do it by ourselves. Last week we talked a little about the individual and corporate parts of faith. During the Object Lesson today I introduced you to Eustace Clarence Scrubb, the antihero of the "Voyage of the Dawn Treader", Object Lesson earlier. I end with an excerpt from J.L. Neyheart's piece "**C.S. Lewis: The Undragoning of Eustace**". He writes:

Eustace found that no matter how many layers of dragon skins he managed to peel off of himself, he was still a dragon.

"Then the lion said - but I don't know if it spoke - 'You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell

you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

"The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know - if you've ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away."

*"Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off ... And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me - I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on - and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again..." - C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader**

This scene always grabs my heart. It reminds me that I cannot fix myself. It paints a beautiful picture of baptism and transformation to new life. It humbles me as I put myself in Eustace's place. And even long after our initial baptism we have the ongoing challenge of surrendering to God's work in our lives which can be painful at times, even when it's a good pain.

And I like Lewis's note of narration at the end of this scene as well:

"It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that "from that time forth Eustace was a different boy." To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun."

Isn't that the way it is for all of us? We begin to be different as the grace of God changes us for the better. The cure has begun.ⁱ

ⁱ <https://www.jlneyhart.com/2014/10/c-s-lewis-undragoning-of-eustace.html>