

### *Deliverance Day*

*This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, January 10, 2010 and is based on Luke 3:21-22.*

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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." Luke 3:21-22

Whenever I Baptize children I like to joke with the parents and tell them not to worry about a thing; I'm really good at baptizing babies because I know what to do with the gown...

In case you didn't know this very Episcopal tradition, most children are brought to the church wearing something special, something for the big day, something that says brunch to follow, and in many cases this is some sort of gown. The reason I'm good with gowns stems from a hard lesson once learned right out of seminary.

I was an assistant at St. John's in Montgomery, a venerable, historic place with such hard and fast rules and traditions I swear their parish mission statement was "we don't do that here." This was also my first baptism, and I was terrified, and mostly my fear was dropping the baby—though I had children of my own and plenty of experience with holding infants, in seminary I had only baptized a rubber doll they kept in a closet outside the seminary chapel, and it didn't squirm at all.

I thought the service had gone pretty well; I didn't stumble over the words and the baby didn't cry, and when it was over I carried the child all over the church so that the congregation might see the newest Christian in Montgomery. But it was here I made my fatal flaw; the gown was all wadded up under the baby's leg. The gown of antique lace and a century old was all hidden beneath a bare chubby leg and a disposable diaper, hanging out for all the world to see. I had no idea that I was creating such a scandal as I paraded that child down the center aisle.

But I would learn the error of my ways. After finishing my part and returning the child to his mother, an old woman approached and with a crooked finger pointed at my nose she told me simply that if I ever did that again she would kill me. I never did. I'm good with gowns.

I remembered this story because today is the day we remember the baptism of Jesus, though I'll have to admit that when we read this story in Luke's Gospel, there doesn't seem to be anything fancy or even special about it. True, the heavens did open for Jesus, and there was a dove and voice, but no one was looking for that; no one expected it, which has me wondering two things about this scene:

First, I'm wondering what the crowds were expecting to find by that muddy river, and second, I'm wondering why Jesus was there with them.

You might recall I tackled the first question just a few Sunday's ago. It was during one of those Sundays of Advent where we talk about John the Baptist, and I tried to imagine why people would travel over miles of bad roads and in all kinds of weather to hear this rough prophet preach to them about wheat and chaff and unquenchable fire.

I will also admit that the longer I live on this world the more I'm convinced I know the answer. They flocked to the river in those days, not so much to hear what John was saying but because of what he offered them, and it's something we all want if we are only honest about it: he offered them a new start, a clean slate, freedom to begin again.

They were excited by the news that they thought John might be the Messiah, the one for whom they had waited for centuries. But John was just the messenger; the promise of God was coming true, and soon...

I've been reading a memoir from a man who fought as a soldier in Vietnam, and while it is a book about war it is more a book about life. I'll offer an example: He says that it is common in every soldier's life to succumb to the strain of war; that is, there comes a time, usually in battle, when danger or the threat of danger becomes so great the soldier cannot bear it anymore. He loses it.

Sometimes a soldier who is perfectly trained and normally poised in battle will fall to the ground and curl up in a ball; he will fire wildly into the air; he will pray to God and Jesus and Mother and Father and make any kind of promise to survive; he will cry and scream and moan, losing all pretense of dignity and be no use to his fellow soldiers at all.

But then, when the smoke clears and the battle is over, the old training, the old patterns take over. He will pick himself up, put one foot in front of the other, and slowly become a soldier again.

This idea gets me close to why I think the crowds flocked to hear John the Baptist in those days. Out by the banks of the river, they were slowly coming to life again. I don't know the battles of living in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but I can't imagine them any different than the battles in the 21<sup>st</sup>. I like to think that they were done with the ways of having to be good enough, or happy enough, or rich enough, or successful enough...

I like to imagine they were veterans, all of them, veterans like us. I like to imagine they had been through their own dark night, that they too had lost it somewhere, somehow; I like to imagine they wanted to live again.

This is whole meaning behind the wheat and the chaff: In those days a farmer would toss wheat into the air so that the wind would clean it out and make it good. The twigs and the clutter and the garbage were gone; the wheat suddenly pure. The same is true for us.

We lose our way, you and me, we forget, we fall to the ground and we cry and moan and though it may only be in secret God knows. But if we let him, he will pick us up and set us on the path again, we can become free again, good for something again, alive again.

If we can only remember this Good News then it should have us leaping and shouting in the streets of Birmingham. If we can only remember this Good News, then this day would be deliverance day, for these children to be baptized and for us---so much more than a nice service with a brunch and a pretty gown.

This is why they gathered at the river that day, and this brings me to why Jesus was with them.

This much I know: If I were to make up a story about Jesus and John the Baptist this is not the way I would tell it. If I were to make up this story I would have Jesus arrive to great fanfare, thank John for his good work, and then take over the baptizing himself. John could help get them into the water. Can you imagine the stories they would tell when they got back home? "We thought we were getting John the Baptist, but then we got the man..."

But it didn't happen that way, and I think there is something special in the way Luke makes it seem so un-special. True the heavens are opened and the dove comes down; true, the voice from heaven proclaims God's pleasure.

But notice that Jesus didn't seek anything special. There is no special recognition from John here, no seat of honor, no brunch to follow. Jesus was just one of the crowd, one of them all, which brings me, I believe, to the meaning of it all.

Hear the promise of God: For God so loved the world he gave His Son. This means God became one of His creation, one of us, to know and to feel what it is like to be us. This means that God has known human joy and God has known human pain; God has known human longing and God has known human anguish; God has known human hunger and God has known human fear.

And here on the banks of the river, God, in the form of his son Jesus put one foot in front of the other, just like those weary souls who needed a break, just like those weary souls who needed a chance, just like those weary souls who needed a start, just like us.

Today is deliverance day, or it can be. We can start over, we can put one foot in front of the other, we can look to the sky in wonder and in hope, we can do all these things because he's been there and he is with us still. The promise is real and it is here. His name is Jesus. Teach the children this Good News.