

## ***“My Son, the Beloved”***

A Message for Morning Worship on Baptism of Christ Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, January 9, 2022

Text: Luke 3:15-16; 21-22

On this Sunday of the church year, we take note of Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River. At first take, this may seem a bit odd given that it was only a few weeks ago that we were celebrating Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, and it was only last week that the Wise Men were paying their visit to the little family. One week later we are saying that Jesus is now a grown man, ready to begin his ministry which starts at the banks of the Jordan River. What the heck! It’s reminiscent of the story line in soap operas when one week someone is having a baby and two weeks later the baby, now grown up, is eloping with an undesirable guy who may or may not be her biological brother given up for adoption years ago! Okay, okay. I watched soap operas once upon a time. But you get my point. How is it that the Gospels, Luke in the case of today’s text, would have us believe Jesus goes from a toddler to a grown man in the space of a few weeks?

Well, of course, they don’t. The fact is, the Gospels simply don’t record any of Jesus’ life between his birth and the start of his ministry when he was in his early 30’s. Luke tells us more than Matthew about these years in his inclusion of the story about Jesus visiting the Temple in Jerusalem with his parents when he would have been about 12 but that’s really it. Mark and John don’t even include the birth narratives at all. The three Synoptic Gospels contain some version of this story of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River by John. In Luke’s Gospel, the placement of the story is such that, if you have been reading Luke from the

beginning, you are aware by this time that John is actually Jesus' cousin and that John's birth was almost as miraculous as Jesus'. You know there have been multiple theophanies – individual's direct experiences with God – like the angel Gabriel's conversations with Zechariah (John's father) and then Mary. You've also read about the divine appearances of the angels to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem and the testimony of Simeon and Anna when they encountered Jesus and his parents as they were bringing him to the Temple for circumcision shortly after his birth. By the time we get to this point in Luke's story, we know something incredible is unfolding before us and that God is right in the center of it. So, there is no surprise when, following Jesus' baptism, God's own voice thunders across the sky as a dove descends from heaven.

Jesus' Baptism is truly a seminal moment in the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It marks the moment at which Jesus' earthly ministry begins. What happened to him between those earliest moments Luke and Matthew depict so beautifully and who he is becoming at this moment is unknown. But none of that matters as Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan. This is a powerful moment, we can imagine, for Jesus and John makes clear in Luke's account that it is a powerful moment for him. But why? What brought John and Jesus, two cousins, to this point on the banks of the muddy Jordan River? Luke, at least, gives us some insight into what's happening here.

In the verses leading up to this moment, Luke gives us a just a glimpse of who John is. Elizabeth's miracle baby boy born after years of barrenness is now a grown man who has dedicated his life

to God so thoroughly that he lives in the wilderness, traveling around and proclaiming what Luke calls “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John is convinced that God is going to bring about some sort of Armageddon in which the kingdom, or realm of God, will finally be proclaimed on earth. He must have been quite the character, dressed in heaven knows what while he shouted at people to repent of their sins. Yet something about him was compelling because people listened. And they came to him in droves to be baptized. Luke notes that these people who flocked to John were not passive folks, cowering in fear at his message of the coming realm of God. No, Luke describes them as “filled with expectation” as they came to him. They weren’t afraid. They were filled with hope that something new and different was about to happen and they had a chance to be part of it! They even asked questions, one of them being to ask John if he was the long awaited Messiah.

He answers them quite directly: “I baptize you with water but one more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Yikes! Coming from John that was quite a statement! John was a larger than life figure, commanding and most likely a little scary leaving us wonder what the people, including maybe even John himself, were expecting when Jesus showed up. It’s noteworthy in Luke that he does not even comment on when Jesus showed up or how or even if he had any direct conversation with John. Luke doesn’t tell us if the cousins recognized each other. Luke doesn’t describe any part of the baptism. He just recounts it as an accomplished fact: “when all the people were baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,” this is the moment when God comes into the picture

in a big way. “The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.” But wait, there’s more! “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” Yikes! I have to admit, I always wonder what John was thinking in that moment as God’s voice booms out. Was he thinking, “huh, well what do you know? I was right!” Or did he think something along the lines of, “what am I, chopped liver?” But we don’t know what John thought, because that’s not the point of this story. Even the act of Jesus’ baptism itself is not the point of the story. God’s acknowledgement of Jesus as God’s own Son, the Beloved, is.

The question for us today then is, how do we see ourselves in this story? How is God speaking to us, right here and right now, through this story? Hmmm, that can be tricky to figure out. Perhaps a way of exploring these questions in a little more depth for ourselves this morning is to revisit what the waters of baptism feel like. Hopefully you have your bowls of water at the ready – thankfully this is actually easier to do during a virtual sermon because you are able to each have your own bowl of water rather than some other contrivance we’d need to use in the sanctuary to get that sense of the water to each of you! What I invite you to do now is to dip your fingers into the water and play with it a little. Splash it! Swim your fingers through it. If several of you are sharing one bowl, make sure everyone has a turn! When you’re ready, dry your hands and then I invite you to do what Jesus did. Pray. Remembering that the water has washed away all that was bothering you before – your regrets and short-comings, your longings and worries. What’s left is a whole new you – renewed by the Holy Spirit and loved unconditionally by God. How

amazing is that! As you are praying as Jesus did immediately after his baptism, dare to do what Jesus did and ask God to reveal to you what's next. What's next for you. What's next for the people you love. Even what's next for our faith community at the church. What's next in this moment of unconditional love and renewal? That is the challenge our remembrance of Christ's baptism brings us today. (*pause for prayer*)

In Luke's version of the Baptism of Christ, this is a moment when Jesus, and each of us, each of the people baptized with Jesus, are empowered by the Holy Spirit to seek to do God's will. Jesus, in this moment, is becoming the leader of an entirely new movement we now know as Christianity. Dear Ones, our invitation from Jesus today, right here and right now, is the very same one he received from God in that moment when the dove descended and God's voice rang out in blessing. We are being invited to become part of a whole new way of living, a whole new way of being God's people in our fragile, broken world. We are invited to come together as a community of faithful in this time and space to figure out the ways, large and small, achievable and aspirational, in which we can engage with the work, God's work, of repairing the brokenness of the world. We are invited to be a part of bringing renewal to ourselves and others through God's love made tangible and real through our actions.

How will we do this? Ah, now that's the real question, isn't it? Luckily, our church through its board and committee structure, already has the mechanisms in place to work on figuring out just what it is God needs us to be doing and how we might be able to get it done. Truth is, this is what we've been doing ever since this church was organized in 1964 and our parent

churches for a hundred years before that. This is the why of the church! We are here to follow where it is Jesus will lead us as we seek through the power of the Holy Spirit to bring love, reconciliation and renewal to God's fragile, broken world. Wow! That is exciting! So, got any ideas? We'd love to hear them! Seriously ... Amen.