

“Chosen and Marked by God’s Love”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

January 13, 2019 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

Luke 3:7-17, 21-22 (The Message)

When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your LIFE that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there – children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”

The crowd asked him, “*Then what are we supposed to do?*”

“If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.”

Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “*Teacher, what should we do?*”

He told them, “No more extortion – collect only what is required by law.”

Soldiers asked him, “*And what should we do?*” He told them, “No shakedowns, no blackmail – and be content with your rations.”

The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?”

But John intervened: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

After all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized. As he was praying, the sky opened up and the Holy Spirit, like a dove descending, came down on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

This past week I was reflecting on my time of first becoming a mother. I remember bringing home Bethany, my first born, from the hospital and everything seemed so new. Life as Jim and I knew it as a couple had changed. Our life would never be the same and that was okay. We wanted a baby. This was something that we had prayed to God to receive. And now, we had this gift and we had to learn to care for her.

I remember the first time that she ran a fever or had a diaper rash or got a runny nose or had a temper tantrum or as a toddler fell, bumped her head and that scary blue, purple goose egg appeared on her forehead. I would call my mom and ask frantically, “what am I supposed to do?” There are no manuals when it comes to being a parent. Yes, there are times when it got a little easier. When I brought Sarah home from the hospital, I was a little more at ease.

However, the job of parenting never stops. It continues and it changes as our children get older. Even as my children are in their thirties and they go through difficult, challenging times. I find myself asking, “What should I do?” When do I help and how do I help? Am I helping or enabling them?

Today, we find scripture taking us into the wilderness to meet up with John the Baptist. The people have showed up in droves to be baptized by John. The Message, which is a more contemporary version of the Bible, states that the people come because it is the “popular thing to do.” One would think that John would be happy over the huge numbers. But, he explodes with frustration because they are not wanting to be baptized for the right reason.

NO! This thing that you are about to do has meaning. It is important that you know that this is a commitment to God. It is important that your life will change. Your life will never be the same!

John comes back and puts them into check. He asks, "What counts in your life? Is it green and blossoming? Because if it is deadwood, it needs to go on the fire to be burned?"

The people come back in response to John's fury with a question, "What are we supposed to do?" The crowd asks. The taxmen ask. The soldiers ask. What should we do?

John answers them by urging them to repent of their old ways and look at serving others in a new way. It goes back to changing your thinking. "If you have 2 coats, you should share one with your neighbor and the same with food. To the tax collectors, "Stop using extortion. Collect from folks only what is required by law!" To the soldiers, "Stop threatening people, take only what is given to you." Ultimately, you are opening yourself up for God to continuously mold and shape you.

This dunk in the river Jordan or a sprinkling on your head is nothing to take lightly. It is a commitment to lead a life of faith. But, if you are like the people standing in line in the wilderness searching for hope, it is no wonder they were asking, "What should we do?" They were looking for the Messiah. A person, who would come, to lead them out of destruction. A person, who would stand up to the political powers and take charge. It is no wonder that from what John was telling them that they believed and questioned if John was that person.

But John makes it very clear that he is not the one. He is just the stagehand. He is the one setting everything in motion because the one that is coming will bring the Spirit. He will ignite the Spirit that is inside all of us like a fire! That fire will have the power to change us. It will have the power to burn away all the trash in our lives...the things that keep us from doing right in the eyes of God. The Spirit will not only have the power to wipe the slate clean for us to start over BUT it also will have the power to give us bold gifts to do the work for God's kingdom.

As we hear about the early disciples today, I wonder if we find ourselves in their shoes. When John comes to us and stresses the need to repent of our sins, do we feel guilty? Do we wonder if we are doing enough for God's kingdom? Do we wonder if the horrible things we have done in our lives are beyond the forgiveness of God? Have I hurt God so badly that there is no way God can redeem me? Am I good enough? I try really hard but am I doing all that I can do? Or, I am tired and the fire in me has grown a little dim. Where is my energy to do God's work?

Here is your answer. Jesus comes along today and joins that crowd of people. He is about ready to begin his ministry. He has grown up in his father's carpenter shop in the sleepy town of Nazareth. He is 30-years old and it is time for him to go out to do God's work. He stands in line with the people not needing to be cleansed of his sin. But he stands there in the midst of their brokenness. He stands there in the midst of their despair. He hears them ask, "What should I do?" He waits to be baptized by John.

And after the people and Jesus are baptized, Jesus prays. We do not know what he says in his prayer. Perhaps, he is a little doubtful with what lies ahead. It would be a human response to doubt. God response, "You are marked and claimed by God's love. You, Jesus, are the pride of my life. You are my blessed son and with you I am well pleased." These are the words that Jesus hears when he begins his ministry.

These are the words that we hear when we are baptized. God is always there with us as we are God's children. No matter if we are tired and our flame has grown dim. No matter what we have done or where we fall short. We hear the pastor say, "I baptize, Mary, Carol, Frank and Goehrig, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Know that God marks and claims all of us. Know that God calls us his children and we are the pride of his life. I want everyone to stand up...look

around....we are all named and claimed as God's children. No matter what...God is pleased with each and everyone of his creations. I want you to look at your neighbor and say, "God loves you...no matter what!" (You can sit back down now.)

John Leith, a Presbyterian professor and theologian, liked to say that every human life is rooted in the will and intention of God: "In baptism the child's name is called because our faith is that God thought of this child before the child was, that God gave to this child an identity, an individuality, a name and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. Human existence has its origin not in the accidents of history and biology, but in the will and the intention of the Lord God, creator of earth and heaven." Robert Brearly goes on to say, "We need to hear this affirmation from God, and we need to hear it from each other. These are life-giving words that every human being upon this earth should hear: "You are my child, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." When Jesus heard those words, they changed his life forever. They will do the same for our children, our neighbors, our spouses, our church members, and, Jesus promised, even our enemies." (Feasting on the Word; Year C, Volume 1; Westminster John Knox Press; 2008 copyright; p. 240 & John H. Leith; "An Awareness of Destiny," in Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian, (Louisville, KY; Geneva Press, 2001), p. 126-127)

Following the sermon, we will come forward and gather a stone from the Baptismal Font up front. We will reaffirm our baptism. The stones today are red reminding us that the Spirit that is within us ignites us like fire when we are baptized. That fire continues to light in us forgiveness, grace, love, service and hope. Perhaps, that fire will lead us to our answer when we ask, "What should we do?" We do this to remind ourselves "what baptism is" and "what it means to us." Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, God's Son who gives us this amazing gift. Amen.