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United Church

January 9, 2011 Squamish

Readings - Baptism of Jesus

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

**Acts 10:34-43**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

### **You have been Identified**

I have to confess that every year I struggle with what to do on this Sunday. I love the celebration and the story of epiphany and so skipping over the journey of the magi who follow that star saddens me a little. And yet the baptism of Jesus also holds a lot of significance and this year I have discovered that perhaps it helps us ask the question what is the next step for us.

We have heard the story of the birth. We have in symbolic ways journeyed to the Christ child. And so today we ask now what?

As Christians and churches we have just completed the one season of the year in this generation where we are seen by all the world. Few question the publicity Christians get at Christmas. Oh I have heard that we are supposed to say 'season's greetings' but I know few who follow that rule and I personally don't know anyone who is actually offended by Merry Christmas.

Rather, at Christmas People expect to see Salvation Army bell ringers at the store, we are prepared to hear Christmas Carols sung and piped through the shopping malls, People around the world send donations to local Christian and church charities, More people show up for church on Christmas eve any day of the year, and I would imagine it's one of the few days most families pray before their family meal.

As I pondered this I began wondering what we would need to do as Christians to be that 'out' and public the rest of the year? What are the other seasons where we are seen and heard? Easter for some. But more commonly we as the church are present in peoples life events - births, deaths, and weddings. The events that every one knows and experiences. The public life events.

Perhaps a public, community event is partially what the baptism of Jesus is about. Even in our scripture this morning we see the prophet wonder why Jesus needed to be baptized. After all you likely learned as a child that baptism as a child is a cleansing ritual. And although that is a piece of the sacrament the forgiveness of sin is only one part of the grace of baptism. Baptism is rather initiation and identification. Baptism is the sacrament by which acknowledge God adopts us as children and makes us members of the body of Christ.

So perhaps by being baptized Jesus was showing his solidarity with his community. Jesus was willing to be identified as one of the people of God. And in this act of Baptism we see his righteousness fulfills the will of God communally.

Still, folks had heard Jesus was to come and baptize with fire and spirit so along with John they must have been wondering what was going on. Wondering, that is until the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove declaring “This is my son in whom I am well pleased.” Jesus is identified as chosen of God. The spirit of the holy acknowledges pleasure with Jesus. So his baptism is the first adult public appearance. (and wouldn’t you know that as soon as Jesus is publicly acknowledged he faces immediate temptation and questioning).

It seems to me this is just another example of how the biblical stories can align with our lives today. How often is it that we too recognize ourselves or others as honored, loved and blessed and then immediately face ridicule or temptation. But Jesus cherished his identity and lived into it fully which meant he did not succumb to the temptations that we so often do.

Fortunately however this very holy baptism is not the only passage we see on Christian baptism in the biblical text. In the reading from Acts today, Peter explains to new followers that the spreading of the message of peace preached by Jesus began in Galilee and from that point on the gospel was open to all. Even Peter was surprised and confused by God’s grace. He says “God shows no partiality.” And we see that clearly through other stories of baptism like that of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the baptism of the prison guard’s whole household, and the baptism of more than 3,000 after Pentecost. Baptism is part of how we identify who we are as people of God.

*The Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz wrote* “When we consider our baptism we might think more consciously about that beautiful verse in Genesis 1: “So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them.” Yes, we believe baptism cleanses us from sin, but even more, it gives us power and grace to accept our own ministry and mission as offered to us by God.”<sup>1</sup>

She goes on to say “It’s tempting to compare our baptism with Jesus’ baptism and for us to come up wanting. He was anointed with power and the Holy Spirit. He went on to preach, teach, heal, and collect a vast number of followers. He suffered, died, and rose again. He was, after all, both human and divine. And us? Our baptism surely must be less... We can accept baptism and then go on to live ordinary lives, forgetting perhaps even the day of our baptism.”

Perhaps that is one of the reasons it is important at the beginning of year to acknowledge the baptism of Jesus and see it as a clue to the importance of our own baptism, life and ministry. After all we too were baptized with the power of the Holy Spirit. The same spirit that was

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<sup>1</sup> -- The Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz is executive director of the Center for Ministry in Small Churches at the School of Theology, Sewanee, Tennessee, and assistant professor of Contextual Education. She is also publisher of “Tuesday Morning,” a quarterly journal of ministry and liturgical preaching. Sermons that work...textweek.com

present with Jesus was present with us at our baptisms and is present with us today. We may not have seen the visual of a dove, and a broken open sky, we may not have audibly heard the voice of The Holy but we have been graced by a God who shows no partiality. We have been adopted and commissioned just the same.

Like for Peter and John the overwhelming Grace of God should surprise us. We follow a God who uses impossible circumstances and people to alter the world. And so perhaps as we remember our baptism we should consider it in a new way. We have been identified by the Holy as chosen, and precious.

“Imagine what the church might look like if each baptized member grasped hold of and used the power that is freely given us by God in our baptism. In Isaiah today we heard these words...: “I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” We know these words were used in Isaiah’s time for his community, and we now use them to talk about *Jesus*, but... they are meant for us too.”<sup>2</sup>

Could we as adopted, chosen, graced and blessed followers of God change the world? Who knows what God could do in and through us if we accepted our identity as deeply loved, chosen, and commissioned to live a life like Jesus.

We are created in the image of God. We are loved beyond measure – all people are loved beyond measure. Imagine how different the world would look if we too showed no partiality. Imagine how different our worlds would look if we took on the power of the Spirit. Imagine what an explosion of hope, peace, joy, love and grace there would be.

This day is a reminder of our anointing. This is our identity. You have been identified by the holy of holies. How then shall you live.

I am going to invite you to sing ‘Like a Healing Stream’ together now. Consider this song a reminder of your identity. God longs to fill the barren desserts of your life Like a healing stream.

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<sup>2</sup> IBID