

Epiphany Series: "God Shows the Way"  
**"Do You Remember?" Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

13 January 2013: 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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**"Every crowd has a silver lining."**

**— Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810—1891)—**

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As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Luke 3:15-17) . . .

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 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 3:15-17, 21-22).

Do you know a haughty person? This would be someone who is arrogant and as we might say down here in the South one who is "uppity." People who are aloof are often regarded as persons who are big-headed or egotistical. Most of us would agree that condescension is rarely an appealing trait. If you were the sinless son of God do you not think that would give you a reason to stay apart or aloof from the crowds. Yet notice in our lesson the almost total identification Jesus makes with the people—and this especially after John clearly lays out a chilling program for sinners, what with gathering wheat, burning chaff, and the unquenchable fire of judgment.

What is theologically meaningful to me in this story of Jesus' baptism is that Jesus just gets baptized right along with everyone else. You remember how Luke casually notes: "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying . . ." It is as if Jesus is simply a face in the crowd with respect to baptism.

This scene at the river reminds me about a trip to Braums Ice Cream store. You pick a number and wait your turn. Down by the river side we watch whomever was baptizing—and in Luke’s story it is not John—he is in jail (see Luke 3:18-20). We can almost hear the person in charge of the crowd call out . . . sixty-three . . . sixty-four . . . sixty-five . . . and each person dutifully moves toward the water. Someone baptizes us because someone baptized Jesus. It is that simple, but “do you remember”—baptism also puts forward a task.

As baptized people we are all ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, it is difficult to switch cultural gears and do the work of the gospel. We live in a success-oriented culture and a success-driven society. The gospel, however, calls us to care primarily for the last, the lost, and the least. As I look back on how I spend most of my time, I notice that I spend time mostly with people in trouble of one sort or another—people in the hospital, people with family problems, people with personal problems, people who want to know how to face death or failure or doubt or skepticism as a Christian might.

Our church spends its time similarly. We train Stephen Ministers to help people in personal crisis of one kind or another. We visit those who are essentially homebound and our ministry of prayer rarely focuses upon successful and winning personalities. Instead we concentrate our intercessory prayers on people with cancer or relational problems with spouses or children and the like. Even our Bible study, Walk to Emmaus, Kairos, Arlington-Reads, mentoring at Webb Elementary—which is named for our fine church member—and other spiritual types of programs spiritually help us to help others who are in need. We spend a lot of time with those on the margins of life. We care as a

church about the elderly and the infants and toddlers. Why?—because this is the baptismal command of Jesus to believers.

When John wanted to know if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus could have discussed the power of his army or the extent of his wealth or the span of his wisdom. Instead, Jesus said: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7:22). For us, if baptism was good enough for Jesus it ought to be good enough for us. Since we spend ample time and energy training our church to take care of those in crisis—do we recognize a crisis when we see one? Hear a story:

In the spring of 1994, two friends and I wanted to relax after a preacher’s meeting as we rarely saw any of our preacher friends. So we decided to play golf in Benbrook. None of us were any good at golf but we did want to catch up and just have fun. Our theme was preachers being just regular people—we were happy to be together!!!

We were together by ourselves, that is, until about the third hole, when out of the woods came a guy named Jim who asked if he could join us. Jim was a much better player than us and we soon confessed we were preachers. Max and I did not really mind the tag-along, but our other friend—I will call him Jack—was really annoyed by the turn of events. He began to play worse and worse as Jim hit one spectacular shot after another. Jack kept grumbling, over and over, “We have one afternoon to ourselves and then this knuckle-head shows up. Why can’t we ever do anything by ourselves?”

Finally, on hole 16th, I realized Jim had said very little about himself. I asked him if he had a job. He told us with some reluctance that he had been diagnosed with a rare inoperable brain tumor and that the doctors told him to make the best of the next six months because that was about all the time he had left. We asked about his family. Didn’t he want to spend time with them? Jim told us that his wife said she couldn’t take watching him die, so she took the kids and moved to California with her parents. He then said that he came to the golf course every day and just tried to be with people. In fact, he had never played golf until the doctors gave him his bad news.

I really felt sorry for my friend Jack because usually he is the most compassionate person I know. It just goes to show, however, that no one needs to look far to find someone in need of community and the hope that Jesus’ gospel provides. When God tells us to take authority, and we take it, we will surely find a use for it immediately. As Christians we do not need to look for people in crisis. They are already all around us. Thanks be to God for a task that is bigger than we are! That is why we as a church are a “One Mile Mission 2.0 Church”—because we want to be there for people who need the hope-filled word of Christ! Amen.

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