



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Called by Name and Precious

Luke 3: 15-17, 21,22

15 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. 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." 21 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."

Remembering names is not easy for me. It can be a professional hazard and consequently I spend more time than others might drilling myself on names and faces. Why? Because one of the primary human needs is to know that we are neither nameless nor faceless. In this impersonal world we want to know we are someone, and others know us by name and care about us. There is a hunger for assurance that we are precious and known by name.

Another primary urge, (seemingly unrelated) is movement toward water. We are drawn to water. The Psalmist declares, "he leads me beside still waters." There is something about living near water that holds an attraction for us. Consequently, we move to the shores of lakes and oceans, streams and rivers. We vacation by the water. We seek the waters for the promises that they hold. But, ironically, these same waters can also become terrifying. Water can be destructive. The tiniest stream can become a powerful current. The ocean can become a raging beast in the midst of a storm. At any time, the waters we love and seek can threaten to engulf us. It is ironic. We seek the water for its promise of peace and life but we fear the water when it threatens storms.

What do names have to do with water? Baptism.

Baptism is about water. Baptism is also about our name and our identity. Baptism is about our self worth. Baptism is water we seek. We desire to have our children baptized. Even the agnostic desires baptism. During the peak of the cold war, Soviet communists had their children and grandchildren baptized. Parents, grandparents go to great lengths and make all types of promises to have their children baptized. We seek the waters for the promises they hold: salvation and the love of God. Yet the waters of baptism are also demanding and can engulf our lives transforming them forever.

Today is the day of the church year when we remember the baptism of Jesus and also renew our own baptismal vows. I want to look at baptism: 1) the promise we seek, 2) the threat we fear, 3) a contemporary understanding of baptism.

I

"Why did Jesus have to be baptized?" It was asked of me during a confirmation class and it is a tough question. The answer gives us an insight into the promise of baptism and its meaning for our lives. One can imagine the look on John the Baptist' face when his cousin Jesus showed up to be baptized. John asked the question for us: "Why? You should baptize me!" The baptism that John practiced was a ritual cleansing symbolizing repentance. Why would Jesus have to be baptized? What did Jesus do that called for repentance? It is no wonder that John was surprised.

The answer to that question reveals to us the promise of baptism. Jesus shrugged and said it is required, "Let's just do it." He didn't talk about its meaning. He didn't talk about the implications. The promise was revealed in what happened immediately following. The heavens opened to him and the voice of God claimed Jesus as God's Son. "This is my son. This is my beloved."

The promise of baptism is that the heavens open to us and God claims us as His children. The promise of baptism is that God calls us by name and declares that we are precious to God.

Michael Lindvall, in his book, *The Good News from North Haven*, shares a beautiful story capturing the promise of baptism. In his fictitious church in North Haven, Minnesota they had a custom at the time of baptism. The minister would ask: "Who stands with this child?" At that time the family, cousins, aunts, uncles, etc. would rise and the baptism proceeded.

One Sunday, following worship, a woman approached the minister about having her grandson baptized. In the course of the conversation, it came out that her daughter had the child out of wedlock and it scandalized many people in the small village. Nonetheless, she wanted to have the child baptized. The father was not around, and the pastor was quite concerned about when the customary question would be asked: "Who stands with this child?" He feared only the grandmother would rise.

It was the Sunday before Christmas, and at the proper time, the young unwed mother came to the front of the church with her child in her arms. Lindvall writes: "She was young, so young and all alone." Then came the question that would reinforce this loneliness: "Who stands with this child?" Slowly the grandmother stood up. The minister was about to continue, when suddenly he heard some movement in the pews. He saw one of the church pillars suddenly stand, then a couple of Sunday school teachers stood, then some elders. At that moment a new couple who just joined the church stood up. "And soon, before his "incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up for this child" and her mother. The mother cried tears of joy. Her child was precious! The scripture lesson that day was from the letter of John, "See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God... God abides in us and his love is perfected in us... there is no fear in love." That morning those words came alive. This is the promise of baptism that we seek.

II

Threat is an ominous word, and I could not think of a better one. The threat of baptism is the recognition that our lives are no longer our own. Baptism is not merely a gift. It is a calling; and obligation. We belong to God. We are, by baptism, commissioned for a lifelong task that is important. Baptism marked the beginning of Jesus'

ministry. Jesus mentioned baptism a number of times. We are most familiar with his command to baptize, but he also spoke of baptism and related to a life of discipleship that ultimately leads to the cross. He asked his disciples: "do you really think you can be baptized with my baptism?"

The threat is the realization that our lives are not our own. We belong to God, and we are called to live our lives in service to God. This is frightening to those of us who think we belong only to ourselves and are accountable only to ourselves.

William Willamon, the former chaplain at Duke University, told the story of the time when the angry parents of a student came to see him. "What are you preaching?" they asked. They went on to say that their daughter was bright and that she had a great future in front of her, and "she is going to throw that all away and become a minister." Willamon thought for a few seconds and then asked: "Did you have her baptized as a child?" "Of course." came reply.

"There's your problem," Willamon said. "It took!" She belonged to God.

III.

The baptism liturgy implores us to "remember our baptism." I don't remember the event. Do you? Baptism, however, has the potential to be a profound experience in our lives, even though it occurred before we were conscious. I cannot remember my baptism, but when I think about it, I do remember all the people who were faithful to the vows they took on my behalf. I do remember, with thanksgiving, my parents, who did the best that they could to share their faith and experience of God with me. I do remember the Sunday School teachers who put up with me. I do remember the individuals who walked an extra mile with me, and were my spiritual mentors.

I cannot remember the act of my baptism, but I remember the faithfulness of others through my life. I remember and offer thanks for them. They are the people who stood up when life asked the question: "Who will stand for this child?" I also know that there amidst those standing is Jesus Christ.

Traditionally this Sunday is a day when Christians throughout the world remember and renew the promise in their own baptism. It is an opportunity to renew that covenant that forms our relationship with God. God renews that covenant almost daily in our lives. Every morning, when the sun comes up again, we are reminded that the darkness of the world cannot overcome the light of God's son, Jesus.

This renewal of baptism offers thanks for the promise of baptism.

- It offers thanks for the people, named and unnamed who stand with us.
- It offers thanks for the heavens that open and welcome us home.
- It offers thanks for the loving God who calls us by name and claims that we are precious to him.

This is the good news. Amen.