

Empowered to Serve

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Ordination & Installation of Elders

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22 Isaiah 43:1-7
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Think about a time when you've had one of those "A-ha" moments – a time when you suddenly realized or understood something in a new or clearer way, a time when you experienced an insightful and profound revelation. When moments like this happen, sometimes you'll hear a person use the phrase, "I've just had an epiphany!" The word "epiphany" can also mean an appearance or manifestation of something.

On the liturgical church calendar, today is the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany. This church season always begins on January 6, which is 12 days after Christmas Day, and it lasts until the beginning of the church season of Lent. Epiphany begins, as it did for us earlier this week, with the biblical story of the **magi** who followed a star and brought gifts for the baby Jesus, in whose appearance they recognized the Jewish messiah. **This story, as well as any epiphany story, represents a moment when the presence of God is revealed in Jesus. The result is that those who experience this come away with a new understanding of Jesus' identity.**

In the same manner, therefore, the biblical story of Jesus' baptism is also an epiphany story, in that, as Luke states it, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" The overall purpose of this story, also found in Mark and Matthew, is that **we, as readers, come to understand and recognize Jesus as the Son of God – that the appearance and manifestation of God is made known and can be found in Jesus.**

In the person of Jesus we come to the realization that God is with us and among us. It is that revelation which forms the basis of Luke's understanding of who this Jesus of Nazareth was. It was a way of saying: **If you want to know what God is like, look at who Jesus is, hear what Jesus says, and look at what Jesus does.**

Since the assigned lectionary gospel readings throughout this coming year will come primarily from the Gospel of Luke, we will discover, as the year unfolds, how Jesus becomes the example, the model, of what we as a community of faith are called to become and do. So perhaps another theological point that Luke wants to make in his telling of Jesus' baptism is this: **Through his baptism, Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit for his public ministry and work in the world. At one level, from a functional standpoint, Jesus' baptism served somewhat the same purpose as an ordination and installation service.** As Presbyterians, we view the act of ordination (whether it be to the office of teaching elder (pastor), or ruling elder, or deacon) as the public acknowledgment that through the nominating process and vote of the congregation,

that a person has been called by God to serve as a leader in the church. **Ordination is not a call to privilege or power, it's a call to service.**

Further, we believe that God empowers those who are ordained with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in order to help them fulfill their duties and responsibilities in leading and guiding the congregation. Let me state clearly, however, being commissioned for service to God and the church is not limited to those who are ordained and called to serve as a ruling elder or pastor. Here's the point. **Your baptism signifies that you are also called and empowered by the indwelling presence of God's Spirit to further the ways of God's – ways of love, compassion, peace, forgiveness, inclusion, justice and hope.**

So as we focus on Jesus' baptism this morning, I would be remiss if I didn't ask you: **What does your baptism mean to you?** Our Presbyterian **Book of Order** actually has a very nice summary of the Reformed tradition's understanding of baptism. I believe there is value in hearing these words directly. So here's a selection of readings from W-2.3000:

Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ... The disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to undertake a life of service and to be an inclusive worshiping community, sharing life in which love, justice, and mercy abounded...

In Baptism, we die to what separates us from God and are raised to newness of life in Christ. Baptism points us back to the grace of God expressed in Jesus Christ...

Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the Church...

Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place.

Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome...

Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship...

God's faithfulness signified in Baptism is constant and sure, even when human faithfulness to God is not.

What a wonderful and inclusive understanding of baptism! While we could spend the rest of the year trying to understand exactly what all of this means in our own lives, it is my fervent hope that you leave this service of worship today knowing that **you, all of you, have a valued place in the family of God.** And because of that, nobody can tell you or me that our lives don't matter. Nobody can tell us that we are unloved. Nobody can tell us that we don't belong.

Finally, and interestingly, I have found meaning in our baptism, and in ordination and installation, through the Old Testament passage we heard this morning from Isaiah 43. Hear these words again as if addressed specifically to you as a message from God.

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through the fire you will not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.*

Like Jesus in his baptism, the words of God are directed to each of us as well. We are beloved children of God, and through God's indwelling Spirit, we are empowered to carry on the ministries of Jesus. That includes ministering to those in obvious need, of course. But it also involves **ministering to each another as members and friends of this particular community and family of faith known as College Hill. That's not just the responsibility of your pastor, or your Ruling Elders serving on the Session. It's a calling to which you are called, as signified by your baptism.** So may God help us all to live out our baptism and our calling to serve as beloved children of God!

Amen.