

Epiphany 1 – Year C – Jesus’ Baptism

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

Not long ago I ran across a fact that I found really intriguing, though I didn’t have a clue what use I could put it to. And, thank goodness, along comes this opportunity. And, here, I thought it was going to be relegated to **Trivial Pursuits** at best. There is a small sect of people *even today* that reveres John the Baptist as their chief influence and prophet. They live primarily in Iraq and number not much more than 10,000 in total. They are called Mandeans. As you might suspect, their most important ritual is baptism. It certainly surprised me to discover that they still exist, but, I suppose, it shouldn’t have. When someone latches on to what he believes is the final truth about something, he isn’t likely to let go easily. Today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke tells us that the Baptist told the Jews who questioned him that he wasn’t worthy even to untie Jesus’ sandals. In an alternate reading, in a different Gospel, he says that he must decrease in stature as Jesus increases. He compares himself to the friend of a bridegroom. The bridegroom gets the bride; the friend rejoices at the bridegroom’s good fortune. But it is important to be clear that it is the good fortune of the bridegroom, not of the friend that produces the joy.

So John certainly seems to have worked hard at convincing folks that it was *Jesus* that they should pay attention to finally, the one who was to come later, the one wearing those sandals he wasn’t even worthy to untie, not *himself*. Even so, John has followers to this very day. Some folks simply figure they already have the truth; and no one’s going to persuade them otherwise. Now I’m not saying this because I’m worried that some of you might decide to ditch the Episcopal Church to become followers of John the Baptist. And, frankly, I’m not saying it in order to put down anyone, like the Mandeans, who refuse to accept the Christian religion. Different doctrines and beliefs aren’t what concern me at all.

No, the magic for me of the Epiphany season is that it isn’t *about* doctrinal truths. Indeed, there is something a bit off kilter even to speak of someone possessing the truth. Ultimately we can’t possess it; we live it. Today’s is a story not about *doctrine* as truth, but about the manifestation of *Jesus Christ* as the truth, Jesus Christ who shows us *how* to live the truth – the one who will baptize us not with water but with fire and the Holy Spirit. Still and all, here he is – being baptized, just like all those others that the story tells us about. So he is both different from them, in his status as the one greater than John, and, frankly, just like them, in his readiness to share their baptism at John’s hand. Which means that he is also just like us, who were also baptized – and marked at that time as Christ’s own forever. In this way, even if we didn’t hear it at our own baptism, just as God proclaimed Jesus to be his beloved he has proclaimed that we are, too. And that is far more important than whether we have the truth – whatever it may be.

One of my favorite contemporary theologians is Douglas John Hall, retired after a long career of teaching in both seminaries and university, most recently McGill

University in his native Canada. *Bound and Free* is his reflections on that career. In it he talks about the problem of looking for some sort of definitive truth:

Sometimes – he says – over these past two or three decades, I have met people – young and old, students, clergy, laity – who have told me that this or that piece I had written, this or that book or essay, had been terribly important for them. While I have been humanly touched, I often have felt like saying to them in all honesty, “Yes, but be careful! I am just a human being, ‘prone to evil and slothful in good,’ as the ancient prayer of confession says, as well as highly fallible intellectually.” Thus in the latter years of my full-time teaching, I frequently took to uttering a line that usually brought a laugh from my students (but I also hope it brought some kind of self-knowledge into their own thinking and preaching): (Now here’s that line) “In theology one has to keep talking, because otherwise somebody will believe your last sentence.”

I suppose (back to me now) that even if we consider everyday life in the most practical way possible the same principle must apply. Almost 30 years ago I was the prosecutor in a drunk-driving trial, and when it came time to select a jury one of the potential jurors was Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel. I didn’t get to have him on my jury because the judge, almost worshipfully, told him that he knew he had more important things to do than sit on our jury and that he was therefore excused.

The incident prompted me, however, to seek to learn what had caused the judge to consider Moore so valuable. And I learned about Moore’s Law, named for him. In a sort of abbreviated form, it’s the doctrine that in a relatively short period of time (18 months is the generally agreed-upon period) the ability to store and process data will double. Now I grant you that we aren’t dealing with something as firm as the law of gravity. But, generally speaking, the law has held, I gather, pretty well over the past forty or so years. Think of how much computing power we have in even an iPhone today, let alone in our desktop computer, and compare it to what we had in a desktop 40 years ago – 1970. Oh, that’s right, we didn’t have a desktop in 1970! But if we had stopped at any step in that period and said that we already had the last word, would we have continued developing the more and more sophisticated computers that we have? Of course not! We can stop *anything* from progressing simply by saying we now know everything worth knowing. Whether we’re talking about computers or medicine or religion or any other field we are a long, long way from knowing everything.

It’s awfully easy in our society to get pretty smug about all that we have accomplished scientifically; so maybe it wasn’t such a great idea for me to have used that illustration. What is truly important about the role of the Baptizer, though, is that he saw the utterly transcendent quality of the man who was to replace him in the hearts of all but that handful of his followers we spoke of earlier. Transcendent – but just as assuredly human. The fact that this Gospel reading pictures Jesus as one of a crowd of folks being baptized is a wonderful way of reminding us that Jesus was not

just God but completely human as well. Therefore our lives are inextricably linked with his. And as he is beloved by God, so are we.

Must we not reflect, though, on the fact that he later died as he did, between two criminals and in disgrace to most who watched, even to many of his own followers? And must not that death evoke thoughts of all those in *our* world (and there are far, far, too many) who have had to endure human suffering, and are suffering even as we speak? Jesus' cross is surely meaningful because it leads to the resurrection, but it shouldn't be thought of as only the way for *him* to get to the resurrection. We all suffer – in many ways – and the *cross* is the symbol *par excellence* of the fact that, in the person of Jesus, God suffers *with* us – and thereby he also reassures us that *our* suffering is *not* the end.

So let's think again of the nature of John's baptism. He can baptize us and cause us to reflect on how we can be better people. He can wash us in that Jordan water and cause us to become purer. He can wipe away the old so as to prepare us, as he did Jesus, for a ministry to others. But he cannot – as Jesus most assuredly did – show us how to be better disciples however we may suffer. In fact, *they* – John and Jesus – certainly themselves both suffered. Indeed, even if we should become convinced, as Jesus himself apparently was at one point, that God has abandoned us, it is Jesus' message, not John's, that God does still truly love us and will *always* be there with us, regardless of how it may sometimes seem, and – most importantly – resurrection *will come*. That, most assuredly, is the crucial Christian message and what makes Jesus, not John, the center of our religion.

AMEN