

Sunday January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
Baptism of Jesus

**PRAYER:** O God, your voice can split the heavens, part the waters, divide night from day. It can flash forth fire, shake the wilderness, and thunder over the storm. Yet, your word so often is heard among us not in the tempest, but in the silence.

Speak to us, O God, and let us listen, that we might detect the whisper of a wing, the rustle of a feather. Let us listen, that we might glimpse the dove and hear the voice that Jesus heard, saying, "You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased." Speak again to us, O Lord, for when you speak, it is done, and behold, it is very good.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** Hear the good news! God said to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weakness, who has been tempted as we are, yet is without sin. In Christ's name we may draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, and there find mercy and grace to help in the time of need. Amen.

**STEWARDSHIP:** God is our source of eternal renewal, and we approach him full of new life. We hear Christ's call to follow, and seek to obey. We yearn to be faithful as his baptized believers. Let us present our gifts as signs of our commitment, and may God use us to lead others to his graceful love.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O gracious God of all creation, whose very voice brought all that we survey into being, from the wonders of nature to the grace of relationships we praise your name. When you called for light, little did we realize that the light we most desired was a light to sweep away the darkness within us. When you called for form to arise from the void, little did we realize that the void that needed filling was in our souls. Thank you for calling us into existence and for not abandoning us to the whims of fate by sending your Spirit as a comfort and hope. We thank you that we can look to you in times of need, rely on you to drive away our doubt, depend on your judgment to curb our folly, and live in the hope that one-day, Jesus shall fully reign in this world.

Loving God, we are keenly aware this morning of those in our midst whose days are filled with uncertainty. We are also mindful, O God, of the special needs of family members who watch and wait in hospital rooms and even in their own homes for signs of healing and hope in their loved ones. Send a special message of love to them today, and give them a strength that most assuredly comes from your presence with them. We pray especially for Colin Carrol and Jim Cookson and our brother Tom Harvey, calling on your healing touch to restore them to full health. For others we know who struggle this day we pray you will lift them from feelings of futility, and enable them to grasp your abiding concern. We seek your comfort for the Muller family and they grieve the loss of Nancy Carroll's mother. Compounded with Colin's sudden illness we beseech you to strengthen both Jim and Nancy in these difficult days. Most of all we ask that you give us a measure of the compassion that Jesus showed. Help us to be open to all in need, that we may become instruments of your mercy.

Our hearts are much attuned in this season of winter to those, ourselves included, who lack any kind of luster, and who wander aimlessly through life. Grant to us all a sense of your will for our lives, the strength to pursue it, and the discipline to do what you would have them do. Erase from us the need to be critical of those who do not conform to our standards. Teach us forbearance as they seek to discern your intentions.

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As we gather today on this celebration of Jesus' baptism, help make this day and all our days a celebration of our own baptism. Fill us anew with your Spirit, and cleanse us of past sins, which estrange us from Christ and from one another. Send us forth as Christ's disciples, abounding in the hope of new life and proclaiming good news to aid the afflicted. Give us your blessing, O God of all creation.

**BENEDICTION:** May God go with you as you depart into the desert, there to meet the temptations of the soul. May the Spirit lead you to an oasis where waters run deep and clouds run high, and where the voice of heaven whispers in the cool of the trees. Amen.

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Mark 1:4-11

“Honey, and Locusts; Yum, Yum”

There was a young boy who lived far out in the country in the late 1800's and who had reached the age of twelve, and had never in all his life seen a circus. You can therefore imagine his excitement, when one day a poster went up at school announcing that on the next Saturday a traveling circus was coming to a nearby town. The young boy ran all the way home with the glad news and a question, “Daddy, can I go?”

Although the family was poor, the father sensed how important this was to the young boy. “If you do your Saturday chores ahead of time,” he said, “I’ll see to it that you have the money to go.” Come Saturday morning, the chores were done and the little boy stood by the breakfast table, dressed in his Sunday best. His father reached down into the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a dollar bill-the most money the young boy had possessed at one time in all his life.

His father cautioned him to be careful, and then sent him on his way to town. The boy was so excited; his feet hardly seemed to touch the ground all the way. As he neared the outskirts of the village, he noticed people lining the streets, and he worked his way through the crowd until he could see what was happening. Lo and behold, it was the approaching spectacle of a circus parade!

The parade was the grandest thing this lad had ever seen. Exotic caged animals snarled as they passed, bands beat their rhythms, and sounded shining horns, midgets performed acrobatics while flags and ribbons swirled overhead. Finally, after everything had passed where he was standing, the traditional circus clown, with floppy shoes, baggy pants, and a brightly painted face, brought up the rear.

As the clown passed by, the little boy reached into his pocket and took out that precious dollar bill. Handing the money to the clown, the boy turned around and went home. So, what happened? Well, obviously the young boy had thought he had seen the circus, when in actual fact he had only seen the parade advertising the circus. I am sure the boy went home satisfied with his experience, but there is a profound sadness in the knowledge we possess of the story, that he could have experienced so much more.

It was like the boy had enjoyed the appetizers, without ever making it to the banquet table. In our gospel lesson today, we encounter another experience of people getting very excited about something about to happen. We know, of course, that the excitement wasn't in regards to a circus coming to town, but rather the scriptures tell us that people were very eager to know when the Messiah was to come.

This anticipation of the coming Messiah was something that waxed and waned from time to time in Israel's history, but in Luke 3 it is so high that the populace was almost giddy. The reason for their excitement was for a couple of reasons. One reason was the Israelites' exhaustion at being the subjects of a pagan empire. For hundreds of years they had gone from one occupier to another. “Enough was enough” they cried out.

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The other reason they were so excited, was that the people were obviously looking for some sign, some indication that the arrival of the Messiah was at hand. So, into this heightened expectation, there arises a prophet unlike any Israel had ever seen, or certainly unlike one they had seen for hundreds of years. It was as if God had become silent for a long time, and now suddenly he had something to say.

Added to the excitement was the odd behavior of this prophet. John the Baptizer as he was called, dressed oddly, ate funny food, and spoke without any restraint. So open was his speech that he even ticked off Herod Antipas who had him arrested and eventually killed. The point is that no one for a long time had spoken so boldly, or acted so differently from the organized religion.

In many ways, John became a spectacle as well as a prophet. People came from all around, out into the wilderness, to see this camel haired clad prophet, and to hear what he might say next. John was so different, and yet so prophetic, that speculation began to arise that perhaps he was the Messiah, or the chosen one. People saw John not as the parade drawing people to the main event, but the main event itself.

“Could it be?” the people wondered. “Could this John the Baptizer be the Messiah?” Eventually someone who had been observing John asked the obvious question that was on everyone’s mind. “Are you the Messiah?” When the question was first asked of him, I am sure you could have heard a pin drop. “This is it! Here it comes!” But those who were expecting the main event through John, were to receive good news, and bad news.

The bad news was that despite appearances, and interpretations of observers, John was not the Messiah. “Ah, shucks! We were so hoping!” But, there was good news. The people had every reason to be excited, and to be full of anticipation, because the Messiah was coming, and in fact was near upon the people. His arrival though, would not be a spectacle like John baptizing with water, but his arrival will be one of judgment.

John refers to the Holy Spirit coming, and sifting the people like wheat being sifted from chaff. The dross, the waste, the uselessness of human life: was about to be cleansed away. John is saying that he is but the parade pointing to the main event about to come. John is the poster hanging up on the wall saying “Come and see this great thing about to happen!” We read on further, that just as John predicted, Jesus came, and was baptized by John, commencing his ministry. The main event was here.

And just as happens with all major events, here too we see that the advertising diminished once the event began. The Gospel of John chapter 3 verse 30-31 records John saying this in response to some expressed jealousy his disciples had over Jesus’ popularity. “He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less. He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. I am of the earth, and my understanding is limited to the things of earth, but he has come from heaven.”

John, the anointed prophet, the forerunner, is eventually arrested by Herod and the parade is over. The camel clad prophet is no more.

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The spectacle in the wilderness has come to an end, and so here in lays the deep question coming out of this experience. “What did people do when John was no more? When the parade was over what happened? We know that some did eventually find their way to Jesus, but I am sure that many simply turned around and went home. They went home having been entertained, having their expectations piqued, only to see it end.

It was a great show: very interesting, very informative, and very prophetic; but it is now over. What might surprise us is that some, who followed Jesus, after seeing John, were somewhat disappointed. John himself was even disillusioned, sending his disciples to inquire whether Jesus really was the one. Some heard Jesus’ words, and he obviously had good things to say, but they kind of missed the camel hair prophet, and the wrinkly skin from being baptized.

Despite John’s best efforts, people were more attracted to the novelty of what he was doing, than they were to the substance he represented. The words John spoke were really nothing new. They were often quotes right out of Scripture. Words heard many a time in the temple and synagogues, but John put on quite a show. Jesus, on the other hand, seemed to almost shun the public spotlight, asking people to keep quiet about what he had done and what they had seen. John was bold, brash, and a real character.

Jesus was constantly being asked to perform some miracle, to put on a show so to speak, but he often refused such bold requests. You see, both John and Jesus encountered an aspect of human nature that is still alive and well today; maybe even more so today. What people want, even in their religious experience: is novelty, spectacle, something to draw the crowds in.

There is of course nothing wrong in being innovative in trying to reach others for Christ, but what are we selling? Jesus called people to the Kingdom of God. He brought the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit. That’s the main event; not the miracles, or the funny clothes that John wore. The hard reality is that when Jesus calls us to: pick up our cross, die to ourselves, love our enemies, and many other hard things, we would rather just see the show.

What, if we have any excitement at all, are we eager about? What fuels our expectation? In our Christian journey, what do we long for; what draws our attention? I consider this a vital question in our spiritual walk. Fueling this in my mind is one of the interesting tidbits of conversation I have had recently, and many times over the years, that has to do with observations, and questions about unusual and new things going on in church services.

Sometimes people laugh about what they have observed, or heard; and sometimes they are angry, and sometimes they are very saddened. One of the reactions I personally have to all of this, is that for some churches the novelty has become the end goal. They have seen their primary mission as presenting worship, or programs, in a way that garners attention. In other words, they want a parade. The focus moves away from substance and the message, to the catchy delivery.

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As Marshall McClewan once said, “The medium is the message”. In churches the danger arises that what we value most is the medium. In our worship, we regularly use words we often use when we evaluate entertainment. “That was boring. That was poorly presented. That wasn’t what was in the program/bulletin. I wonder what is going on at the other church/channel. I can’t wait to get this over so I can get on to something more interesting, or more stimulating.”

The danger in seeing novelty as the end game, is that like the little boy in the circus story, where people come to see the novelty as the important thing. They begin to assess the value of their worship, and ministry experience, by how it makes them feel, or how entertained they are, not on what truth or substance they have encountered. Therefore, Jesus’ message of judgment, of wheat being sifted, is exchanged for spectacle.

It is very easy to figure out when novelty has replaced substance. Just ask yourself what you remember after the service. Is it a biblical truth that stretched you, or the production value of the service? Do you remember meeting Jesus, or being entertained? Do you remember the Word made flesh, or the package it was delivered in? It kind of reminds me of the experience some parents have of buying that special gift for their child only to have the child more interested in the box it came in?

In relation to this is the observation that we are in great danger of remaining immature in our faith do to our spiritual laziness. The call of Christ to the hard things of faithful living, can easily be forgotten, or covered up by the demand to be wowed. Our efforts to only appear faithful, are really avoidance mechanisms to pass on those demands of our faith, that stretch us, or make us sacrifice comfort.

I found something that originally appeared on the website of First Baptist Church Regina. I am not sure who wrote it, but the power of what it says cannot be easily dismissed. It is someone’s creation of a letter imaging Jesus supposedly writing to his followers about the subject of Christmas. Here is what it says.

*It has come to my attention that many of you are upset that folks are taking my name out of the season. How I feel personally about his celebration can be most easily understood by those who have been blessed with children of your own. I don’t care what you call the day. If you want to celebrate my birth, just GET ALONG AND LOVE ONE ANOTHER.*

*Now having said that let me go on. If it bothers you that the town is which you live doesn’t allow a scene depicting my birth, then just get rid of a couple of Santas and snowmen and put a nativity scene on your own front lawn. If all my followers did that there wouldn’t be any need for such a scene on the town square because there would be so many of them around town.*

*Stop worrying about the fact that people are calling the tree a holiday tree, instead of Christmas tree. It was I who made all trees. You can remember me anytime you see any tree. Decorate a grape vine if you wish.*

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*I actually spoke of that one in a teaching, explaining who I am in relation to you and what each of our tasks is. If you have forgotten that one, look up John 15:1-8. If you want to give me a present in remembrance of my birth here is my wish list. Choose something from it:*

*1) Instead of writing protest letters objecting to the way my birthday is being celebrated, write letters of love and hope to soldiers away from home. They are terrible afraid and lonely this time of year. I know, they tell me all the time.*

*2) Visit someone in a nursing home. You don't have to know them personally. They just need to know someone cares about them.*

*3) Instead of giving your children a lot of gifts you can't afford and they don't need, spend time with them. Tell them the story of my birth, and why I came to live with you down here. Hold them in your arms and remind them that I love them.*

*4) Pick someone that has hurt you in the past and forgive them.*

*5) Did you know that someone in your town will attempt to take their own life this season because they feel alone and hopeless? Since you don't know who that person is, try giving everyone you meet a warm smile; it could make the difference.*

*6) Instead of nit picking about what retailers in your town call the holiday, be patient with the people who work there. Give them a warm smile and a kind word. Even if they aren't allowed to wish you a "Merry Christmas" that doesn't stop you from wishing them one. Then stop shopping there on Sunday. If the store didn't make so much money on that day they'd close and let their employees spend the day at home with their families.*

*7) If you really want to make a difference, support a missionary—especially one who takes my name and love to people who have never heard my name.*

*8) Finally, if you want to make a statement about your belief in and loyalty to me, then behave like a Christian. Don't do things in secret you wouldn't do in my presence. Let people know by your actions that you are one of mine.*

*Don't forget; I am God and I can take care of myself. Just love me and do what I have told you to do. I'll take care of the rest. Check out the list above and get to work; time is short. I'll help you, but the ball is in your court. With all my love, Jesus.*

This is just a small sample of the demands of a true faith in Christ. In the end though the question remains; are you truly eager for Jesus and for all he stands for, or are you still focused on the spectacle that some try to sell as the main event? What will happen to you when the wheat is separated from the chaff? Will you content yourself to experience separation anxiety, or as I hope, we can all learn to choose the road less traveled.