

With Jesus

January 10, 2010

Richmond United Church

First Sunday After Epiphany

Luke 3:15-22

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

This morning we have Luke's version of Jesus baptism. And the implications of it for the early church.

Baptism is one those things we do in church and think we know its meaning. But there is confusion. The confusion is seen in the words 'done,' or 'christening.' Then there is the debate over adult or infant baptism. What we know is understandings have changed over time.

Our passages give us many understandings from which the church has built doctrine and rites. To understand how our understandings have changed requires discernment.

This morning I will be giving a teaching sermon. Today we know much more about the times in which Jesus lived than we ever did. And we know more the shape of the religious reality of his day.

I think faith is a basic trust in wonder and beauty and that meaningful existence is possible. But faith needs language and a system so it can be shared and be more than private experience. This is where a belief system comes in. We live in the Christian belief system that has evolved out of historical experience, personal experience and human reflection.

I am doing what Luke does. He creates a narrative about the meaning of Jesus based on the testimony of earlier communities and his own belief in the Christian message. He is writing it to a community that lives some hundred years after the original experience. It is a community that now exists outside Judaism and is made up of mostly gentiles. He is writing a theology that speaks of a universal experience of a particular activity of God. Those who he writes to grew up within the Christian trajectory. They want to know who Jesus is for them? Their question is how do they understand the ongoing process of God working in history and how history is being redeemed? To answer, Luke uses the witness of the apostles. In a similar way we base our witness on the witness of those who came before us as well as our own experience of God.

Luke is writing a narrative that has historical roots. Yet he is not writing a history book. He assumes the testimony of those he knew and read were giving true testimony.

We know that all history is written from a perspective, from viewpoints. Even if we take the camera to an event, what the director chooses to film is only a partial historical truth. We know eye witness accounts are always biased, and never fully what happened. What is looked at is the information that many witnesses left,

and then interpreted by the writer, and the writers community of other historians. That then is history. In that sense this is Luke's witness.

From all the information we have, clearly a man named Jesus lived. He was a faithful Jew, followed the rites of that faith, became a religious teacher, and in fact, was within what is called the prophetic tradition. As a human being he was a man of his time.

What made him different from other reformers of Judaism was his message. Now there were other reformers, for example the Pharisees with whom he enjoyed similar viewpoints and projects. The gospels down play this reality, and much of preaching forgets this similarity. But it is important to know. I like to put it that the Pharisee were the United Church of that time. So, for Jesus they gave good knowledge but their wisdom was incomplete.

Luke, in his narrative, sends us in this direction. Luke has Jesus grow in understanding of his vocation. It was a gradual process built on the beliefs of his day. This week we see the hints of the beginning his ministry - his baptism. Now there is a difference between ours and his. There is an indication he was influenced by John the Baptist, yet he moved on from there. His baptism is, if you will, his ordination. A setting out of his goal of reforming the temple religion, to call it back from the influences of empire, and to remind his community of the basic insight of Judaism: only God is king and to God all loyalty must be given; and this allegiance leads to a life of virtue, caring for the other rather than self-interest.

Jesus was God intoxicated. He taught. He healed. He created communities. And his focus was the nearness of God to each person, and that nearness called others to live a life of compassion and justice.

We also know that his message created enemies within the empire - Rome and those who supported Rome. The Empire of Rome was threatened by this movement. Rome crucified those who opposed it. Jesus was one many who suffered in this way.

What the early community did was to take these bare experiences and reflect on them. They were a community who worshipped the God of Judaism, who had through, or with, Jesus experienced the beauty of God, knew the kingdom of God was within them and within the world. Taking the artefacts of the religion of that time, they affirmed that with Jesus and in Jesus the kingdom was present. Thus they called Jesus the Christ - the one through whom they experienced the beauty of God; the experience that was a Teutonic shift for them, turned their lives around. In their experience was the resurrection of Jesus by God.

They moved from knowledge of God to the wisdom of God. God worked within history to lure it to more beauty. This gives the wisdom that humanity had a crucial role in helping this to happen. They created communities that transcended that time and space and have influence the course of history. History is different because of Jesus and because of the affirmation of Jesus as the Christ. That affirmation became their marching orders. Their baptism of fire. And with them it becomes ours.

An early affirmation of belief is, with the apostles, through Jesus, we experience God. What this affirms is that belief is finally a very materialistic event, it has a historical route. Private experience always leads to wordily solidarity. Belief works its self out in community and action. Baptism is the beginning of this process not the end. It marks one as a seeker within community.

What is being affirming is that God was incarnated in Jesus. Through his religious reality, his openness to others, his consciousness became God consciousness. He was filled with the spirit of God as much as a man can be. He shows us that we too can experience God within, feel the spirit so that we can show God by our actions. He is our window into God. He is our model of living the lure of God. This is not some unnatural event but a very natural experience open to all who wish to move from knowledge to wisdom.

With Jesus we are lights of God. With Jesus we live the reality of the kingdom of God on earth. With Jesus we too live a life of compassion and justice. With Jesus we welcome the other so our consciousness is expanded. With Jesus we see creation as blessed and bless it. With Jesus we become the historical manifestation of God in the world. With Jesus and one another we are a community of the blessed, we are not alone we live in God's company.

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