

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 10, 2010
First Sunday after the Epiphany/
Baptism of Our Lord
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 89:19-29
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-22

Quite often some of the most fertile soil for preaching comes from the different ways the various Gospel writers tell their stories of Jesus and his ministry. Such is the case today with Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus.

Luke's version is quite different from that of Matthew and Mark. Luke has very little interest in the event of the baptism itself, neglecting to tell us *where* Jesus is baptized or even *who* does the baptizing. Instead, Luke very intentionally pushes the event of the baptism itself to the background, and focuses instead on the events surrounding it, namely the opening of the heavens and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus.

Added to this is an additional detail that is rather strange. As Luke tells the story, John the Baptist is already in prison. In fact, for Luke, it is John's ministry and his imprisonment by Herod Antipas that forms the context for the baptism of Jesus. If Luke subordinates history to theology, it may be because he wants us to understand Jesus' baptism by paying close attention to what has happened to John the Baptist. So let us do so for a few minutes.

You may recall that this same text came before us just a few weeks ago in the middle of Advent. John called on the people to repent and change the course of their lives, speaking of One who was to come that would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The text tells us that John's preaching was a message of *Good News*. We asked then, as we do today, how images of a winnowing fork and unquenchable fire could be construed as "good" news.

The answer to that is that it all depends on who you are, and where you stand.

For Herod, John's preaching was anything but good news. Herod was a despot. A tyrant. His cruel and evil ways filled the people's hearts with constant fear. They were constantly wondering how he would use his unrestrained power. They had seen people imprisoned, beheaded, tortured, and crucified. Each day they arose facing the reality of how fragile life was under the rule of this maniac.

But then one day, they hear John out in the wilderness, preaching that the power mongers of this world like Herod are about to be disrupted and overturned by One who will gather them as wheat into a granary and toss the chaff into the fire.

And John doesn't just speak in vague generalities. He calls Herod to account publicly and specifically.

Such a message is definitely not “good” news to Herod, or those like him. The rulers of this world want to preserve power at all costs. They seek to suppress or destroy those who would announce an alternative vision of what life can be. They hire spin doctors to counter any criticism, or they just suppress the opposition altogether.

This is precisely what Herod does to John. He has him thrown into prison. One version translates Herod’s actions as “shutting up John in prison.”

That’s what Herod attempts to do. To silence the proclamation of the coming one, to “shut up” the vision of a new creation, to “shut up” the advent of a world no longer controlled by despots. For a message of chaff burning with unquenchable fire is never good news to tyrants.

This is the setting for Jesus’ baptism, at least as Luke tells it.

When Luke tells us that the heavens “open up,” one scholar believes that he is describing an action that directly contravenes Herod’s “shutting up” of John in prison. [See Thomas Troeger, *Lectionary Homiletics* 21:1, pp. 1-4]

Herod “shuts up” hope; Jesus opens up hope as a possibility. Herod “shuts up” a new creation; Jesus opens up a new creation. Herod “shuts up” the reordering of the ruling structures of this world; Jesus opens them. Herod “shuts up” the power of God; Jesus opens and unleashes the power of God.

By placing Jesus' baptism here in the context of Herod's brutal and vicious response to John's message, Luke reminds us that baptism is far more than an act of personal or individual piety, whether the person being baptized is Jesus, or whether it is you or me.

For when we follow Jesus into the waters of baptism, we are making a statement. We are bearing witness to our desire not only for new life in our personal lives, but a new life for the whole world. When we enter the waters of baptism, we are renouncing Herod's action of "shutting up" John, of "shutting up" hope, of blocking the transformation of this world. We are affirming the opening of heaven, the opening of hope, and the release of God's renewing power in the world.

Every time we have a baptism in this church, we are bearing witness to the message John preached, and we are re-preaching it. It is not good news to the Herod's of the earth. It is not good news to those who want to "shut up" the transforming power of God. But it *is* good news for everyone who yearns for a new world, for a second chance, for a new start.

Every time we reaffirm our baptismal vows, we are giving testimony that the opening of heaven is greater than any human effort to shut up the power of God.

Before we come to the Lord's table this morning, we will do just that. We will renew our baptismal covenant. In renewing that covenant, we remember again

that as the Spirit anointed Jesus for his ministry, so also the Spirit anointed us at our baptism, empowering us for our unique place of service and ministry in the body of Christ.

And as we receive the gifts of bread and wine, the Spirit continues to empower us for the work Christ has called us to do. For there is fire to be walked through now, truth to be spoken to power, and healing to be offered to the whole creation. Through us, God continues to open up the possibility of grace, of healing, of forgiveness, of restoration. And when God opens a door, no human being can shut it.

On this day then when we commemorate Jesus' baptism, I join my words with Martin Luther and call on you to remember your own. Remember *who* you are, and *whose* you are. And let the light that shines from your life bear witness to the power of grace not just for you alone, but for the whole world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.