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Baptism Tells Us Who We Are

Luke 2:41-52 NRSV, emended

Now every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When it was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.

Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. They then started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then Jesus went with his parents down to Nazareth, and he was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

As the world has moved on, packing away the Christmas decorations, munching the on the last cookie and making resolutions for a New Year, we gather again to celebrate one more Sunday of Christmas. I may have already seen Easter decorations already springing up for sale in Target, but as a church, we have said that one night or even one week is not nearly enough time to marvel at the mystery of the Word-made-flesh to dwell among us. This was not just a historical event for us to commemorate, but a world-altering moment that still changes who we are today.

As we enter into the story of the Christ-child this week, the swaddling clothes have been exchanged for a tunic. We no longer gather with the shepherds around a borrowed manger nor do we join the magi in bringing our own costly gifts to lay before the child. Instead, we look on with the teachers of the law, amazed at how Jesus teaches - as one with authority. With them, we wonder who this child might be.

This is not the first time Jesus has been to the temple in Jerusalem. Raised in accordance with the law, he was circumcised and named on the eighth day. As the firstborn of Mary, he was presented at the temple, designated to the Lord as holy and consecrated through the sacrifice of two turtle doves. Filled by the Spirit, Simeon, who dwelled in the temple, took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying "My eyes have seen your salvation."

There is no doubt who the child is:
foretold by the angel Gabriel,
affirmed by Elizabeth,
celebrated by the angels,
witnessed by the shepherds and
prophesied by Simeon and Anna,
this is truly the Son of God, the one who will redeem God's own people.

As Mary treasured the words and pondered them in her heart, I picture her telling her son the stories of his birth, the story of who he is. I imagine Jesus, first as a babe in arms, adoringly trusting the stories his mother told him. As he grew older and learned more about the world, I wonder if he began to question her memories, wondering how much was truth and how much was family legend.

Every year, Mary and Joseph have returned to the temple with Jesus to celebrate the Passover. This year, on the cusp between childhood and adolescence, does not go quite as Mary and Joseph had planned. When they finally return to the temple and find their son sitting among the teachers, Jesus replies with his first words recorded in the Gospel according to Luke, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

In these words Jesus spoke, he claims his identity as the Son of God. For the first time, it is not a claim made by someone else, but by himself. There is no doubt that he knows who he is - and is beginning to show what that means. He is guided by something other than his earthly parents, beyond the religious requirements taught to him.

We often think of adolescence as a time of discerning identity, and I wonder if it was the same for Jesus. Parents spend much time and energy providing experiences and mentors to help their children discover their identities. That has become the goal of successful parenting in the twenty-first century - that by the time a child becomes an adult, they will have discovered who they are meant to be. The way to that is a carefully managed, packed schedule, full of lessons and classes and teams. Secondhand stores are full of all the sports equipment and musical instruments tried and discarded along the way.

As much as it is a time honored sport for one generation to cast aspersions on another, this isn't limited to Gen Z. Even as adults, we can struggle to know who we are. Every new season raises the question again. The whole self-help industry is built to try to help us define our identity - helping us become a leader or an entrepreneur, an influencer or a guru. And all of these are not just about becoming someone, but about becoming the best. Yet all these identities are fragile, simply one injury, one lay-off, one investment away from being shattered.

We spend all this time and energy discovering who we are, when we have already been given a new identity in Christ. In baptism, we are called children of God, baptized and redeemed for the sake of the world. We are given a vocation to proclaim Christ through word and deed, to care for others and the world God made and to work for justice and peace in the world.

This isn't to say that everything will be easy, that our whole life will be #blessed. Baptism may be one of the most dangerous things we do with a child. In a time when childhood was precarious, baptism came to be understood as a way to ensure a child would have eternal life in heaven after death, even if the child died young. But perhaps a better image is the one in today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures - Hannah dedicating her child Samuel to the Lord, allowing him to be raised in the temple as a priest and prophet.

We are called to leave ourselves, our identities behind at the font. We take on a new identity as a beloved Child of God - one who is loved simply because one is. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans [6:8], comparing baptism to death, "If we have died with Christ in a death like his, we believe that we will also live with him." Living with Christ is no easy matter. In an essay titled *Risk and Resistance* in the book The Sandbox Revolution, Bill Wylie-Kellermann writes about his daughter Lydia's decision to embark on a potentially dangerous mission trip as a young adult (196). Like any parent faced with letting go as their child grows older, he asked her, "'But don't you need your dad's permission to go?'. It was a joke rooted in [a] father's fear. [But] to [the] question about a permission slip, Lydia replied, 'You already gave me your permission. You baptized me.'"

Wylie-Kellermann continues, "Baptizing an infant in arms is a celebration that says to the child, 'You are loved by God. You are surrounded with love and care. As a pure act of grace, you are already part of this beloved community and there's not a thing you can do about it either way. It just is. A gift. But here's the caveat: we now commend you to the way of discipleship, the path of risky and costly grace. Take up your cross and follow Jesus.'"

The next time Jesus preaches in the Gospel according to Luke, we hear what he comes to do...and get a taste of what it might mean to follow him. In the synagogue at Nazareth, he takes the scroll and reads Isaiah's charge to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. Saying, today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing [Luke 4:21], the people were again amazed at his teaching.

Last time, his teaching was ended by anxious parents who made him go home. The next time, it will be ended by irate listeners, running him out of town because they struggled to accept this identity Christ claims for himself.

As much as baptism can be dangerous, it tells us who we are and gives us purpose. It frees us to care for others and for creation, working for justice and peace. It frees us to offer our lives for the restoration of the world.

And in doing so, our lives bear witness to the freedom found in Christ so that others may see it and come to know salvation and wholeness. Many of the saints who have gone before can attest that living with Christ bears the risk of following in his footsteps - through betrayal and crucifixion - yet we know that this is not the end.

Knowing and living your baptism means that we will not face life alone, that we have the promise that death and evil will not have the final word. Instead we are assured that, in the end, love and life wins, that the way of Christ also leads to resurrection.

The good news is this - you are a child of God. Baptized by the water and the Word, sealed by the Holy Spirit, you belong to Christ, redeemed and refreshed in the waters of baptism. As you enter a new year, with all the temptations to make resolutions to be and do something else, with all the messages bombarding you that you need to be something different, something more, may you rest in the knowledge that your identity is secure, that as a child of God, you are loved and enough just as you are – and may that free you to be who God created you to be. Amen.

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52