

"Sharing Your Child"

Luke 3:15-22

January 11, 2019

The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, "Could this John be the Messiah?"

But John intervened: "I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

There was a lot more of this—words that gave strength to the people, words that put heart in them. The Message! But Herod, the ruler, stung by John's rebuke in the matter of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, capped his long string of evil deeds with this outrage: He put John in jail.

After all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized. As he was praying, the sky opened up and the Holy Spirit, like a dove descending, came down on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, my Beloved child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life. With you I am well pleased."

At 6:00 on Friday morning this week, I looked out my bedroom window and saw that it was snowing. My first reaction was to sigh...audibly. The sound I made was enough to wake up both dogs who were lounging around on the bed—all over the bed, now that I had left my place.

My appreciative brain was thankful for the winter white scene outdoors. The sounds of the morning were muted. Usually I can hear cars and trucks on Hwy 83; that morning all was quieted by the white blanket of

snow that still covered the commuter's roads. Often lately, I have heard the thousands of geese populating the Pinery's Bingham Lake awake and fly noisily and busily through the early morning sky. Not Friday, though. They were huddled together on the water as the wet snow sifted down from the sky onto their backs and heads.

The spiritual side of me heard the trees respond to my sighing with their own aaaahing as they drank in the much-needed moisture from the storm. The hard ground softened. The deer rolled around on their backs, cleaning their coats and ridding themselves of pesky insects. The scene was beautifully Colorado; my artistic senses were awash in how variant our weather can be here. Our brown grasses and blue skies can so quickly give way to a whitewash landscape and matching sky.

But I sighed. I had to drive into north Denver in the snow that morning. I knew that would lengthen the travel time to my destination and dirty-up my freshly-cleaned automobile—I had no idea on Thursday that the snow was on its way; I just thought I was awfully lucky that no one was in line ahead of me at the car wash!

Was it slick? Would it get worse? Did I have my snow scraper in my back seat? Could I cancel my appointment?

I sighed. I sighed also wondering how many times I would have to go out and shovel the porch, steps, walkway, and deck. Chris has a snowblower for the driveway and long sidewalk, but I hand-shovel the rest. Sigh...

About then our dogs ambled over to the window to see what I was seeing. While I was busy dreading going out, they were realizing the winter wonderland before them. The Boyz started barking and jumping around wildly as they headed pel-mel for the gate that blocks the staircase down to the yard.

"Yippee! It snowed! We want to go outside and play! This is the greatest thing ever! We are lucky puppies!" they cried. Hmmm. Who was better able to appreciate nature's morning blessing? Me or the "dumb" creatures?

Mary Birch Hospital for Women & Newborns in San Diego, California has a website where you can log on, enter a password, and watch in real time how your baby—our grandbaby—is looking doing in the NICU ward. Preston Lee Dawson was born prematurely—10 weeks early—nine days ago. It's been touch and go for him ever since.

He has holes in both lungs and in his heart. The internal organs of an unborn child form up and firm up in those critical last 10 weeks of the gestation period. Preston was born with breathing problems and a rapid heart rate. He was a really sick little guy for his first week. We were hopeful, but so, so worried for him.

When I watched him on the website in the early morning hours when I couldn't sleep, I really couldn't see him very well. Tubes and monitors, breathing machines and bandages concealed nearly every inch of him. He was heavily sedated so that he stays calm. His eyes were covered and I

couldn't see them either. Yet I could see on the screen his little chest rising and falling. I could see him sucking on his pacifier. I could watch our son and daughter-in-law or nurses at times reaching in the incubator to stroke him gently or to let him grasp their fingers. It was remarkable.

Of course, he won't remember any of this trauma and stress and worry we have all been experiencing. He'll ask over and over to have his story told to him when he is old enough to hear of his miraculous birth and first few weeks of life. We appreciate the blessing we have been given this week; he of course, does not.

Joe sang to you of a parent's anticipation and love for his child yet unborn. I wonder what Joseph was thinking as he and Mary awaited the coming of this child they knew only as one they would share with God. I wonder if they could truly appreciate this blessing.

We know virtually nothing about Jesus before age 30. There are two birth stories that don't agree and one snippet of a story in Luke about him at age 12. In that story his parents take him, along with throngs of other faithful Jewish folks, to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. As they are leaving to return home, in all the confusion and crowding, they lose track of him. Panicked, Mary and Joseph retrace their steps to the city, searching everywhere for three days around the Temple environs.

Finally, they checked on a whim inside the building and there was their 12-year old son, Jesus, sitting with the scholars and teachers. He was conversing with them about religious topics and answering questions they

asked of him with the sophistication of a seasoned rabbi, though he was a mere boy. Sadly, they could not appreciate their blessing.

Jesus at that early age already had a sense of his special relationship with God. As his mother was scolding him for wandering off, and his father was catching his breath, relieved to have found him safe, Jesus was incredulous towards them, asking, "Did you not know that I would be in my Father's house?"

This was the first inkling the beleaguered parents had that God's Spirit was also claiming its child. Jesus was already enjoying God's blessing and God's calling; at age 12 he already appreciated this special bond and blessing and he acted on it. He already knew God in tender, fatherly relationship. He thought of himself as God's child. He was deeply curious about God; he asked thoughtful questions and exhibited sophisticated insights well beyond his years. For 18 more years after he returned home to Nazareth, Luke writes that "he matured in wisdom and years, in favor with God and with people." (Luke 2:52) That's all we know. I wonder just how much we can appreciate the blessing that is Jesus and his story.

Our passage today is one of my favorites. The story is rich in imagery and powerful in metaphor and message. We have Cousin John, the Baptist, son of a powerful religious leader in the Jewish faith. He could and should have had a big house, fine clothes, and many servants. Conceived after God's angel blessed his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, he should have been on easy street for his whole life.

But that was not to be his way. The angel gave him to his parents—blessed them with a son in their advanced age—but claimed him, too, for special work in the name of God.

It was the work of a Temple priest to perform baptisms, ritual cleansing ceremonies. Temple baptisms were essential to maintaining ritual purity. Foreign travelers to the holy place were seen as “unclean,” exposed as they had been to people of other cultures and religions. There were baths set up all around the Temple perimeter where the faithful sojourners could wash themselves and be “clean people” again in the eyes of God. It was all very holy, very structured, and very, very solemn.

Just imagine how the people reacted to John, son of Zechariah, who rejected the Temple priestly life for the hinterlands 80 miles away. Not about making people ritually clean in the Temple baths, John was using the filthy water of the Jordan River to wash away the sins—the separation of the people from God-- and make them ritually clean again. He was with and of the people showing them that they were *already* God's beloved children, blessed beyond measure just in their very being. He was calling the people to repent, meaning to rethink everything that they thought about God and each other, to reorder their lives not by rules and ritual, but rather by the transformational love of God and its call on them to live in response to that love.

The people started to wonder aloud whether he was the promised Messiah, the one who would save them from their oppression. But John

knew his mission. He knew who he was and was not. As he thundered and gestured openly before the crowds who had sought him out for baptism, he said something like, "I'm not the main attraction! I'm the warm up act for the real deal. I am only paving the way for the one coming after me. He will set everything on its ear. He will bring the change we need!"

For weeks and months following his prophecy about the coming of the one true Messiah, John baptized people in the Jordan, bringing them into community with God and with one another. One day a young man about John's age asked to be baptized in the river. He was aligning himself with the Galilean protest movement against the Temple aristocracy, the same aristocracy with whom he had sat some 18 years prior, teaching and questioning them. In this one act, Jesus took his heavenly parent's blessing and deliberately rejected its privilege.

In this one request that his Cousin John join with him in baptism, Jesus demonstrated that all people—with no exceptions—were the beloved children of God, able to receive the same divine blessing. No priests were required; no Temple taxes or sacrifices needed to be paid. No one was excluded from the Kin-dom of God.

And then comes my favorite part of the story. The skies crackle and open with the rumble of thunder. We expect to read next that a heavenly army or a giant lion or a sizzling thunderbolt descends from the sky, something to symbolize God's power, power given to his Beloved, his son. We want Jesus to mount a sturdy silver steed and dash away to

Jerusalem to confront the evil ones. We want Jesus to take charge and bring God's kingdom forcibly to the people.

But what do we get? Not weapons of mass destruction, not silver and gold-lined knights mail and magical swords, not chariots nor an army. We don't get massive eagles with tongues that spit fire, no wild boars bent on destruction, no heavenly decree making him a true King. No, we get none of these sexy things—instead, we get a dove, a peaceful, quiet, slowly descending dove, a common creature, not a fighter, not a predator, not a fierce reminder of the Almighty God.

A dove. A symbol. A symbol of peace and nonviolence. John didn't say, "Here's your King, bow down and worship him." He didn't say, "Here's God secret weapon, a viper come to strike down our enemies." Instead, he said quietly to a silenced crowd, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." In essence he declared that God would bless those who sought peace and justice in the world, the lambs who were willing to be sacrificed for the message of love, willing to be slaughtered so that folks would no longer be separated from their heavenly parent. "Sins" were not "wrongs, bad acts, omissions of faithful practice." Sins were those thoughts and actions that kept the people from experiencing the transformational power of love. The agenda was peace. The goal was relationship. God wanted the people to seek peace and justice, for in doing so, they would be one with God's Holy Spirit.

I love this image. Richard Rohr says it this way, "We are already in the presence of God. What's absent is awareness." John came to make the people aware. The skies opened up in a dramatic display and a lowly, non-descript dove came fluttering down near Jesus' head so that the people would be aware of God's presence, of God's love for all God's children, all of us, no exceptions.

Note a very important element to this story, all of us out there in self-judgment land, all those of us who strive for perfection in all things, all of us who think we have to perform to be paid, that God's blessing only comes to us when we have pleased God with our good deeds, with our holiness, with our church attendance and on-time tax filings, with our never-ending quest to look good, be smarter than the next person, and quote the Bible chapter and verse in answer to every moral and political question of our day and time.

Listen up, all you who think heaven is a reward you get only if you live a clean life, a piece of divine cherry pie you get to consume if and only if you have professed your belief in Jesus Christ as your Personal Lord and Savior, something *really* special that you think only Christians are privy to enjoy—listen up:

Here again is God's blessing to Jesus, booming into the silence from the crack in the sky so all could hear it, "**You are my Son, my Beloved child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life. With you I am well pleased.**" God's blessing comes to Jesus before he's done *anything* to

earn it. Jesus has not yet begun his ministry. He hasn't preached to a single crowd, healed a single blind man, picked a single disciple, written a single famous prayer or designed for us the Last Supper Communion sacrament. He has done *nothing*, and yet, God has blessed him.

How could this *be*? This does not square with our time-honored, finely honed Protestant Work Ethic. This does not line up with Catholic guilt, Puritan pride, or American social values. You have to *earn* God's love, don't you? It doesn't just come in the form of a blessing that drops out of the sky for all to see and feel and romp around in!

Or does it, my dear furry canine companions? Or does it, my precious 9-day old grandchild? What do you understand that I don't?

Ah, Richard Rohr, I am starting to get it now, *we* are starting to get this lesson now. God is with us, with us all, right now, right here, blessing and loving the creation. We just have to be aware of it. We just have to wade in the water, be free of our separation, and recognize God's call to be one with our sisters and brothers, one with the created world, one with the blessing that is being offered to us all on the wings of a dove. When we are loved, we can love in return. Then we can take that love out into the broken and hungry world. That is our personal epiphany, awareness and transformation. That is all God asks of us. We just need to appreciate the blessing.

May It Be So.