

Sunday, January 13 and Wednesday, January 16, 2019
The Baptism of Our Lord + Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
“Breaking In – Splitting Apart”
Rev. Nancy M. Raabe + Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

Jesus’ baptism. It seems like a natural thing to happen as he is about to begin his ministry. It is how we begin our lives of faith. But think about it: Why did Jesus need to be baptized? In baptism we are cleansed from sin, clothed with Christ, and our hearts are turned toward God. All this was already true of Jesus. The church’s earliest theologian, writing around 150 AD, gives us a good answer: Jesus had no need to be baptized, but did so in order that his identity as the Son of God would become known to the world. There were huge crowds here at the riverbank as there had been for all of John’s baptisms. They all witnessed the event as a community, just as we do when someone is baptized here and we pledge together to support their life in Christ. To all those people, Jesus arrived as a carpenter and he left as the Son of God.

But there is an even bigger question before us. Why did the Holy Spirit come into Jesus? Weren’t Father, Son and Holy Spirit already together at the dawn of creation?

My thought is that the Holy Spirit fell on Jesus not because it was not already there, but because heaven and earth intersected a way that had never happened before, not even at Jesus’ birth. As Jesus stood waist-deep in the Jordan River, the heavens weren’t just opened; the verb actually means “tearing apart, splitting apart.” Elsewhere in scripture the heavens open to reveal God in prophetic visions, but nowhere else are the heaven ripped apart. What this signified not only the breaking-in

on earth of the kingdom of God, a kingdom ruled by love, but the shattering of the cosmic order. At that moment, God's love, the most powerful force in the universe, cracked apart Satan's stranglehold on creation. The full victory comes in Jesus' Resurrection and its final realization when all creation is reconciled in God's love. But it is here at Jesus' baptism that we encounter the beginning of the end of death.

But we are not here only to be theologians. This pouring-down of God's mystery and power helps us to understand who we are, why we're here, and what's going on in our world, because heaven and earth are not separate places. They are both part of God's great act of creation.

To see what the effect of this was on Jesus, and what it continues to be on us now, look ahead at what happened next. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil. Since we don't get Jesus' temptation chronologically in our series of readings this year, let's hear Luke's version in the contemporary translation known as "The Message."

Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry.

³ The Devil, playing on his hunger, gave the first test: "Since you're God's Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread."

⁴ Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to really live."

⁵⁻⁷ For the second test he led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. Then the Devil said, "They're yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I'm in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they're yours, the whole works."

⁸ Jesus refused, again backing his refusal with Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness."

⁹⁻¹¹ For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, "If you are God's Son, jump. It's written, isn't it, that 'he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; they will catch you; you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone'?"

¹² "Yes," said Jesus, "and it's also written, 'Don't you dare tempt the Lord your God.'"

¹³ That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.

The Devil is still at work in this way. We find in the lives of the saints spectacular stories of resistance. An early history of the 4th century desert monk St. Anthony relates that Anthony once decided to spend the night in a tomb. All kinds of demons appeared to try to destroy him and his faith.

The demons made such a racket that the whole place was shaken, knocking over the four walls of the tomb; they came in droves, taking the form of all kinds of monstrous beasts and hideous reptiles. As much as Anthony suffered, his response was to laugh at them: "The proof of your powerlessness is that you are reduced to taking the form of senseless animals. If you have any power against me, come on, attack me! But if you cannot do anything, why torment yourselves unnecessarily? My faith in God is my defense against you."

We everyday humans cannot always summon this will to resist when we most need it. Pride is usually the avenue through which sin enters, fueled by fear and insecurity. People are tempted pretend that they are more, or better, or more accomplished than they really are. Perhaps you remember the story years ago of former Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke. She had written a gripping feature on an eight-year-old heroin addict that went on to win a Pulitzer Prize that year. With all the attention to her story, people wanted to know more about the boy. The city mounted an all-out search that turned up empty-handed. The mayor had figured out that there

was no such boy, but at first he lied. He said they found the boy but that he died soon after. When that lie was exposed, the reporter was forced to admit she had fabricated the entire piece. The pride of her editors was at fault too, because they had supported its publication, knowing it would boost sales, and nominated it for the Pulitzer.

From the reporter's perspective, why take such a risk? Why not simply write the truth and do well at that? Was the stress of knowing she could be found out at any time worth it? Or did her pride blind her even to that reality?

There are all kinds of ways people lie. By mistake. By omission, leaving out relevant information. By restructuring, distorting the context and spinning the truth. By denial, refusing to acknowledge the truth. By minimizing, reducing the effect of a mistake or judgment. By exaggeration, representing something as greater, better, more experienced or successful than it really is. Or by fabrication, deliberately inventing a false story.

Under pressure at one time or another, some of us may have been tempted in one or more of these ways. But when we find ourselves on the witness stand, literally or figuratively, do not be afraid. Resist the devil. Instead, follow your heart to God's heart of love. For our faith is rooted in a God who always love us just as we are, who is always forgiving, and who is always is calling us to come back.

The heavens have cracked open and God is here. Christ has redeemed you. Do not be afraid. God is with you.

Amen.

