

Last Sunday we marked the conclusion of what I call the 12 Days of Christmas, ending with Epiphany January 6<sup>th</sup> with Matthew's story of the three Wise Men coming to worship the Christ child. One week later, (January 13), we celebrate Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan—Luke says Jesus was “about 30 year's old” when he began his ministry. In one week we jump from Jesus' birth to his baptism. Thirty years old! Thirty silent, hidden, formative years of Jesus' life!

Wouldn't it be interesting to know what the influences were during those hidden years of childhood and early manhood that led him finally to leave the carpenter bench to seek out John and the waters of baptism? Largely silent years...

Luke does tell one story of the boy Jesus at 12 years (Luke 2:41ff) when he and his family celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem. On the way home his parents realized he was missing from the company and returned to search for him, finally finding him in the temple listening to and asking question of the teachers. Responding to their expressions of dismay, the boy Jesus responded, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”

The King James Version of the Bible has an interesting variation of Jesus' question: ” Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?” The New RSV translation may be more accurate, more likely, but the meaning is not that much different. The truth is that Jesus would someday be about his heavenly Father's business, rather than his earthly father's—Joseph's!

The fact is we just don't know the experiences in Jesus' early life during those hidden years that led him to the Jordan. For example, we hear nothing of Jesus' father, Joseph, in the gospels during Jesus' ministry. Some wonder if Joseph had perhaps died sometime prior to Jesus' ministry. Had Jesus, then, for a time been the primary wage earner for Mary and the family? We just don't know. All we know is that one day he left the carpenter shop to be baptized by John and engage in a ministry of teaching and healing that changed the world!

Our experience of baptism is somewhat different. I have no memory of my baptism since I was baptized as an infant. I suspect that is true of most of you also. In some ways I regret that.

My wife, Phyllis, being raised an American Baptist, remembered vividly her baptism by immersion, a rich and meaningful experience, and one she made the decision to enter into.

Infant baptism was a practice begun very, very early in the Christian Church. Baptism became the means by which one became a Christ follower and a part of the body of Christ, the Church. Most persons in the earliest years were baptized as adults (although the Book of Acts records families that were baptized). My hunch is that as Christians married and gave birth to children, the question was raised about the status of their children, vis-a-vis, the church. The baptism of infants became accepted practice, making it clear that the children of Christian parents were part of the family of faith. The UMC continues the practice of infant baptism but it means there is a period of many years before the children grow to become intentional followers, disciples of Jesus Christ. And that implies a responsibility for both parents and the church.

Our New Testament lesson today relates an incident where baptism is separated from the commitment it implies. The people of Samaria, in response to the preaching of the gospel by the apostle Philip, were baptized. However, as the parenthetical note of verse 16 says, "...as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." The full impact of a changed life had not come upon them.

The Gospel text also hints of a two-step process: John the Baptist tells the people present, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." There is the act of baptism, whenever it is administered, and then there is the time when the Spirit moves in a person's life to be, in fact, a follower, a disciple of Jesus. The latter experience *may* coincide with the act of Baptism, or it may click in sometime later, after a period of time.

So I want to leave you with the question; **what experiences will the youth of this church have during those hidden years between their baptism and confirmation that will lead them to respond to God's call in their lives?** When an infant/child is baptized in the church, not only the parents make a promise but so do we as the Church. I call your attention to the promise we make during every service of baptism:

*With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.*

So the question becomes how are we/you as a church fulfilling our vow and promise to provide those experiences and tokens of love and forgiveness during the hidden years of youth? How are we surrounding them with “love and forgiveness that they may grow in their trust of God and be found faithful in their service to others”?

Phyllis and her confirmand...

Sometimes the “hidden years” continue on into adult life when the circumstances of life hold at bay God's call to be a serious, intentional disciple of Christ—education, marriage, family, vocation, the struggle to make it economically. It is possible that even some here at worship today have yet to consider, seriously, God's call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus said;

*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill (or a church built on a hill!) cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand and it gives light to all in the house. ...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. [Matt 5:14-16]*

You are/were created in the image of God. You have been baptized as a child of God. Jesus heard God say, “You are my beloved Son...” In baptism God says to you, “You are my beloved son/daughter!” Don't hide your light under a basket! You are called of God to be engaged in your heavenly Father's business!—to allow God's spirit to come alive more fully in you!

I used Eugene Peterson's Bible paraphrase (The Message) of Psalm 29 in the call to worship. I would like to close by quoting his rendition of Jesus's words I just quoted from the Sermon on the Mount:

*You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—**shine!** Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.*

As Jesus began his ministry... “The time is fulfilled and the rule/kingdom of God is come near (at hand). Repent (turn around, head in a new direction, set a new direction in life) and believe (trust) in the good news.” He speaks to us today!