

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

January 10, 2010
Baptism of the Lord
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Affirmed by Love

It was just a week ago that when we gathered here our sanctuary was still festively adorned for the Advent and Christmas seasons. We are a fortunate congregation to have those gifted with the talent to make this space, and other spaces around the building, reflect the joy and beauty of those seasons. Although I suspect that there are a few who are sorry to see the decorations packed away for another 11 months, there are many more who are just as glad to move ahead into this new year.

When we were here last Sunday there was still a sense of holiday break to our time together. Sunday School classes were still in recess, along with the public schools. There were those here who were in town in connection with the New Year holiday weekend. While there are probably a few here today who are still in the area as part of an extended holiday break, most holiday travelers have returned home and are re-engaging in their winter routines. Many of you today have returned from your own holiday travels and are getting back into the January routines.

And it was still the case last Sunday that our focus in worship was on the coming of Jesus, before he was grown up and before he had begun his ministry. The Advent season of anticipating and getting ready for the coming of Jesus, gave way to the celebration of Jesus' birth and God's breaking in to the time line of history in a new way. But today—really just 2½ weeks after we celebrated the Nativity, we find our focus has already shifted to the ministry of Jesus that began with his baptism.

The four gospels in the Bible that tell the story of Jesus spend very little ink on the events before Jesus began his ministry. It's as if once the Christmas point is made—namely that Jesus was born of Mary, God becoming human—it's time to get on with the rest of the story. And it's that rest of the story that is the focus of our attention from now until next Advent that this year begins on November 28.

But before we make that transition today I want to talk for a moment about one last aspect of Christmas, because this particular aspect stands in contrast to what is done the rest of the year. Christmas is so much about God's invitation to come and see the Christ child who has been born and in whose birth the course of history will be changed. The two stories we have in the Bible about visitors to the Christ child are both about God extending an invitation to come and see, an invitation that is accepted and results in awe and wonder. The first invitation is extended by God through an angel who appears to shepherds in the middle of the night. The angel tells them what has happened and then invites them to see and experience with their own presence. These shepherds weren't looking for this Christmas event. They weren't looking for the promised Messiah. They were just minding their own business, doing what they were called to do tending the sheep, when God enticed them into becoming witnesses to this miraculous event.

The second story we have is about those other visitors who couldn't be more different from those shepherds. These wise men from the east were also invited to become witnesses through the enticing star that had appeared in the heavens at the time of Jesus' birth and had caught their attention. While they were learned men who were aware of the

Messiah promised to the Jews, there is no indication that they themselves were looking for that Messiah until they were invited by a star to come and see for themselves. And in their subsequent visit to Jesus and his parents their witness became a confirmation of sorts of the miracle of that first Christmas.

Perhaps it is because of these accounts of the special invitations that were extended by God to the shepherds and wise men that we in our contemporary Christmas observances go out of our way to extend an invitation to the world today to come and see what God has done. So much of what we do during the season is geared for those who are not routinely with us, for those who have yet to know the fullness of God's coming in Jesus. Although we surely enjoy those Christmas decorations, they also serve to make a positive impression on those who visit our church during this season. We have special events like our service up at Rockhaven as well as the community Messiah sing along in addition to the special services we have on Christmas Eve. Each year during this season we see hundreds of people in our midst in addition to our ongoing community of faith. In following God's invitational lead, we too extend that invitation at Christmas. A major focus of the season is to reach out and invite others to discover Jesus.

There is a subtle and yet profound shift in focus that occurs after Christmas, and that shift is coincident with the baptism of Jesus. If we think about the meaning of baptism in which it is a turning around and going in a new direction, in which one repents of one's sins, and in which one makes a commitment to become a follower of God, then why in the world would Jesus be baptized at all? After all, does Jesus need to turn around and go a new way? Does Jesus need to repent of his sins? Does Jesus need to become a follower of God? The answer to each of these questions, of course, is no. Jesus is both divine and human and yet without sin. Jesus, as the son of God, needs not become a follower of God. So in these three classical understandings of baptism, there is no need for Jesus to come to the Jordan River where John is baptizing and seek baptism for himself. And yet that is exactly what he does.

In our tradition, baptism has an added dimension to it that augments both the repentance from sin as well as the commitment to following God and Jesus. In baptism we also celebrate the joining of those being baptized into the community faith that we call the church. But even that dimension of baptism—the joining of the faith community—is a stretch as a reason for Jesus being baptized. Jesus himself is already at the heart of the faith community. His baptism to recognize that seems superfluous. And yet this is how Jesus begins his public ministry.

To understand his baptism, at which point his public ministry begins, we can find some insight by looking at how his public ministry concludes, in his crucifixion on the cross. Because across the ages another perplexing question has been asked, namely why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Both questions, "Why was Jesus baptized?" and "Why did Jesus have to die?" have in their answers a common element. In both his baptism and in his crucifixion Jesus was demonstrating in clear and in no uncertain terms his complete oneness and solidarity with humanity. In submitting himself to baptism, along with all the rest of the crowd that day, he is entering into our human experience as fully as possible. For in his experience of baptism he enters into a fully human experience of what it is to be

a child of God—a child of God just like you, and a child of God just like me, and a child of God just like any other who has committed to follow.

The baptism that was in practice at the time of Jesus' baptism is baptism by full immersion in a body of water like the Jordan River. Although we today practice full immersion baptism in naturally occurring bodies of water, we in this northern hemisphere have moved baptism indoors and although we have no objection to baptism by full body immersion, our more common practice is to baptize by sprinkling. What is most important in whatever method, is that the one being baptized is understood to be going under the water and symbolically dying to one's past and rising out of the water, or coming out from under the water, into the new life that is promised by God.

In the case of Jesus' baptism, we read that after Jesus had been baptized, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Lk. 3:22) It was a heavenly confirmation that what Jesus had done in this public event demonstrated his solidarity with his fellow human beings.

In contrast to the Christmas event in which God extends an invitation to come and see Jesus, beginning with Jesus' baptism, Jesus is coming to us. Jesus in his baptism enters into humanity so that we find him in our midst. No longer do we seek to see Jesus, but we discover that he is in our midst seeking us.

When we discover this—that Jesus is here in amongst us—we too will find that we are claimed by God as God's beloved. We, as brothers and sisters in Christ, become fellow beloved sons and daughters of God.

So as we pack away the nativity scenes, carefully wrapping up the baby Jesus who we have been invited to see, we find that as we now journey into this new year, we are already companions with Jesus who has come to be among us making our way through our human lives in the community of faith, the church.