

Luke 3
Embry Hills UMC
January 10, 2010

This morning, we gather once more at the river, where lots of people had gone down to pray. And, they had gone down to the river to be baptized by John. Lots of the people John baptized thought that he was the Messiah. And, questions about whether John might be the Messiah persisted well into the early history of the Christian movement. But, that aside, let's get back to the point. People were going down to the river to pray and to be baptized.

They were responding to John's preaching, which was a message of turning your life around. I know that John's message is often considered a firebrand message. And, we often think of his preaching as loaded with brimstones and dripping with fear. But, truth be known, the message of repentance is a message of good news. Whatever you've done, wherever you've been, whatever you've failed to do, you can turn around. There's a new beginning waiting for you. A whole new life awaits you, a highway of joy and possibility spreading out before you. All you have to do is start. Just begin today. Turn your life Godward. Repent.

And, this message of new promise and new possibility was apparently resonating with lots of people. And, they were flocking to the Jordan River to be baptized by the one who was preaching this hopeful message of turning life around in preparation for all that God was about to do.

And as you know, one of the people who came to be baptized by John was Jesus.

Luke doesn't tell us why Jesus wanted to be baptized. In fact, as you noticed, Luke's commentary on Jesus baptism is ever-so-brief and after the fact. But, I have an idea that John's message about a new start resonated with Jesus. To listen to Luke's Gospel, lots had been stirring in Jesus for a long time. His birth was accompanied by hosts of angels. When the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple, a man named Simeon, who had been promised that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah, sang a hymn of praise when he saw the child. And, when Jesus was twelve years old, Luke has him in the Temple, engaged in dialogue with the teachers. And now, whatever has been stirring in Jesus is ready for full expression, and it's time to launch.

And so, Jesus' baptism is the initiation of his ministry. When he heads to the river, it's his way of beginning the march on the path he felt himself called of God to follow. And, that's the first thing I want you to hear today. It's just like John tried to tell the people. There's a new beginning waiting for you. Whatever you've done or not done, whatever mistakes you've made, you can start again. That's what repentance is. It's gotten such a bum rap, since it's often been tied up with all of those scary messages of fire and brimstone. But, the hopeful message of repentance is that it's never too late to discover and to follow the path that leads you most Godward.

So, today is a day for remembering your baptism, for celebrating the new beginnings God makes possible in your life, and for initiating or re-initiating your ministry as a Spirit-ordained servant.

And, that's the other thing I want you to notice today. I want you to notice how Jesus decided what he was supposed to do. He launched his ministry in his baptism, and the direction of that ministry was discovered as he searched the Scriptures.

We have to roll the tape a bit forward into the 4th chapter of Luke's Gospel. Not long after his baptism, Jesus spends those forty days in the wilderness. And, while we don't know exactly what he was doing during those days of retreat, I'm willing to bet that he was remembering or reading his Scriptures. Because, right after that wilderness time, he goes back home to preach at his home synagogue. And, they bring him scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And, Jesus knows right where to go. And, when he found the passage he was looking for, he read it and told the people that's what he'd be up to.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free."

If baptism launches ministry, then the study of the Scriptures provides direction and focus to that ministry. And, that's the other thing I want you to notice.

On this second Sunday of a brand new year, we sound the hopeful message that you can start again, that a new path of promise and possibility awaits you, that God is calling you to minister. What is God calling you to do? Spend some time in your Bible.

What I'm talking about here is not so much Bible study. Those of you who know me know that I love Bible study. I love to get in there and put those texts under as close a microscope as I know how. I love to dissect the texts and understand their various contexts. But, that's not the exercise I'm talking about here. I'm talking about the Bible not as an object for study but as a tool for devotion. I'm not talking about you and me studying the Bible as much as I'm talking about allowing the Bible to study us. I'm talking about allowing ourselves to be guided, to be corrected, to be re-directed, to be energized. I'm talking about an open-hearted reading of the Scriptures, so that, like Jesus, you can discover in the pages of Scripture the nature of the new beginning you already know God has in store for you.

Some in our church have launched an effort to read the Bible through this year. However you choose to do it, I do hope that you will spend some time sitting at the feet of this book that believe contains the Word of God. And, when we approach the Bible with open hearts, or when we allow the Bible to approach us as a spiritual guide, we will discover something that God would like us to do.

So, repent. There's a new day for you. A new beginning. A new path. Whatever you've done, whatever you've left undone, whatever guilt you have or regrets that linger or mistakes that you've made, baptism reminds us that there's a new path of promise and possibility before us. And, the shape of that path, that path's direction, waits for us as follow Jesus in the example of discovering what Scripture is looking for fulfillment in our lives.