

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Next”

Luke 3:15-22

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There is an odd phrase in the passage I am about to read. Luke’s telling of Jesus’ baptism is not like the account found in Mark’s Gospel. Mark doesn’t even mention the crowd who have come to hear John or receive his baptism. He tells the story as if there are only two people at the river, John and Jesus. Matthew’s Gospel tells of the crowd, but Matthew makes clear that there is one who is greater than them all, including John. John sees Jesus standing in line, and yells to him: “Jesus what are you doing here? I’m not fit to tie your sandals. You don’t need to be baptized by me. I need to be baptized by you.” Heads turn. “Who is it? The messiah? Where is he?”

But Luke doesn’t tell it that way. Oh, he has John saying that there is someone coming who has so much more to offer than what he has to offer. But that’s in John’s sermon. When it comes to describing Jesus being baptized, there is just a throw-away line. Listen for it... and listen for God’s Word.

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added to them all by shutting up John in prison.



²¹ Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² 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.”

“When Jesus also had been baptized?” Doesn’t that sound odd to you? It’s as if there is a manifest of all those who were baptized that day and you have to run your finger down the list to find Jesus’ name.

I lost my passport once. In Canada. Actually, I think it was stolen from my backpack when I had lunch in a restaurant, and you know how those Canadians are. But whether it was stolen or not, I lost my passport. I was on a skiing trip with Bruce Stockburger, his son, Michael, and his brother-in-law, Joe. I had to cut my trip short, go to Quebec, and sit in a waiting room at the US Embassy that looked like every DMV waiting room I have ever sat in before.

Banff was beautiful; the scenery stunning; but there I sat in a plastic chair staring at a wall that had a clock and a screen, waiting for E-37 to be displayed so I could go to one of the windows and get some help.

I didn’t know the people sitting on either side of me. They didn’t seem interested in finding out that *my name is George Anderson*.

B-18.

I normally would be skiing, you see. I’m OK. I’m no expert, but I can ski black diamonds if there are no moguls.

C-27.

I have a life back home. I am a responsible husband and a father to three children. You want to know their names?

D-7

I am the Senior Minister of Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, VA:

E-34.

Oh, we have to get to E three more times before I can get help. Like everyone else in that waiting room, I had to wait for my number. I had to wait while others were helped like I needed to be helped.

Imagine, Jesus having to sit there in that waiting room, waiting, waiting, waiting for his turn. How would this story go if Luke were telling it? “And Jesus’ number also was called...”

I remember when my daughters were born. Rachel, for instance. After she was bathed and attended to, after Millie and I had a chance to hold her and I could get the necessary tears out of the way, she was taken from the room to the hospital nursery and placed in one of those clear-sided cribs that are lined up equally spaced from each other.

No matter what color the baby,

no matter how nice the car would be that was used to take the baby home,

or how grand or modest the home might be,



each wore a white diaper and a plastic strip around an ankle.
Those *nurses were odd*.

They treated Rachel no different than any other baby lying there.

What if Jesus had been born in the hospital that day. On the second row of cribs and the third from the left would be this clear-sided crib with a card attached where written in magic marker would be the name, “Jesus.” If Luke’s telling the story, the line would be: “And Jesus also was born that day.”

As with the last time I preached, Fred Craddock got me started on this sermon. He suffered paralysis once because of Guillain-Barré syndrome. He had to go through some extensive physical therapy to be able to walk again. At first, he would stand between bars and pull himself along, but there came a day when he would be one of four who would have the bars pulled away and he would be expected to walk on his own for 10 seconds.

The first to try was Charlie who had suffered a stroke. Charlie drooled, he could hardly speak, his mouth was drawn. Finished second grade. A dairyman. A fine man, but he drooled and Fred didn’t enjoy eating with him. And Charlie told the same story over and over again, that he was part of a promotion campaign where he milked a Holstein cow in a DC-E flying over Atlanta—the only person ever to have milked a cow over Atlanta. You could read about it because it was written up on the Atlanta Constitution, which Fred didn’t need to do because even with only half his mouth working Charlie told the story about 897 times. They pulled the bars away and Charlie did it. He walked a few steps and got ice cream.

Earl was next. Earl was a mechanic who worked on 18-wheelers. Big guy; strong guy, tough guy; potty mouthed. A jack slipped and he was crushed, and now it would take all his tough-guy-strength to walk a few steps. He did it and got ice cream.

Then Elizabeth—single, a retired schoolteacher. A single-car accident. She kept explaining that she had not been drinking. She also didn’t like the way her therapist talked to her. “Why do people talk to old people like that? I’m not a child.” Fred stood up for the therapist, but then later heard the therapist say, “The reason you are feeling pain there is because of your injuries.” Fred had to admit it, Elizabeth was right. Anyway, they pulled the bars away and Elizabeth took her few steps and got ice cream.

And then it was Fred’s turn because he was called forward. He wasn’t called by name. No one said,

- “Fred,”
- or “Fred Craddock”,
- or Dr. Fred B. Craddock, the Bandy Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University.”

No, someone just said, “Next!” They pulled the bars away, and Fred struggled to do what the other three had done. He did it and got ice cream.



What if Jesus needed rehab that day? What if the bars were pulled away and he managed to take his steps? I think Luke would simply tell us, “He also got ice cream.”

Miller’s baptism, it was special, wasn’t it? We make baptisms special around here. We meet with the parents. We mix in a dollop of water from the Jordan River because that is where Jesus was baptized, and we mix in a dollop water from Scotland because that is where the Presbyterian Church was born. And we don’t get it out of the way so the parents don’t have to work hard to keep the child happy and clean. No, we wait until after the *Prayer for Illumination* because the Word Enacted is as important as the Word read in scripture and proclaimed in sermon. We have children sing a “Welcome Song.” And, you know how much we ministers at Second Presbyterian Church like babies. Baptism is never a “Have to.” It is always a “Get to” for us.

But what would Luke say about Miller’s baptism? That his is no more important than any other baby baptized here at Second... or anywhere? Would Luke say of Miller what Luke said of Jesus, that “Miller also was baptized?”

I don’t quite know how to describe what Luke does with his throw-away phrase. There is this “Stripping Away” quality to his saying “Jesus also was baptized.” I mean, read his Gospel. Jesus is the *Messiah*, the *Son of God*, the *Savior of the World*, but in his baptism he is just another in line. Where is the head-turning? I mean, look at who all are baptized.

The three ministers of this church are baptized.

So are inmates in prison.

Most of those who are in church this morning are baptized.

So are those skipping church this morning.

There’s a guy out there who rescued a dog that had been abused by its owner,
and a woman who makes it a habit to dump her fast-food trash on the street,
and they’re both baptized.

Maybe to understand Luke’s perspective, we would need to listen in on a 12-step recovery meeting—if it is open, that is. There is a stripping away quality to those meetings when someone says their name and then doesn’t follow up with,

“and I own a business,”

or, “I’m homeless,”

or, “I belong to a prominent family,”

or, “I live on the streets.”

Each one says his or her name and then says, “and I’m an alcoholic,” or “I’m an addict.” In the moment of introduction, everything is stripped away except the reality of one’s need. Where’s the dignity in that?

Maybe, it is in this: “And Jesus also introduced himself.” Maybe in the “stripping away,” there can be found the dignity of self-acceptance—accepting one’s need and accepting God’s grace.



It's what Luke is saying, I think. Remember, the baptism that John offers is not the baptism of the later church. What John is offering is a ritual developed by the Essenes where one admits one's sins, gets a ritual washing, and then tries to live a better life. "You have to try harder. You have to live better." It's also a baptism you can receive over and over again. So, all those people who are lined up to receive baptism—well, let's say it is not their finest moment. Not for most of them. They want to get in that river because they feel dirty with their sins. And it is that moment that Jesus decides to join. "And Jesus also is baptized."

Can you see the dignity in that? And can you see the dignity in the way we offer baptism as the church when it is not about our trying harder, about our finally getting it right when we had gotten it wrong, when it is not about something that we have to do, but about what Jesus did in being baptized with us... for us. The dignity is in the *moment of exposed need met by the gift of grace*.

Some have a hard time getting their heads around that. In fact, a tried-and-true tactic of bullies is to expose people in order to humiliate them. You know,

- like the boy made to cry on the schoolyard,
- or the mistakes of a young woman published on social media.

On my trip to the Holy Land in March, I visited a Holocaust Museum. It's the third Holocaust Museum I've visited. In each of the museums, you see pictures of the intended degradation. For instance, in the museum in Jerusalem, I saw a picture of Jewish women being forced to stand naked in the streets in front of gawkers and mockers. The message is, "You thought you were something. But you're *just a Jew*."

The "stripping away" of Luke's Gospel is not that. Yes, Luke is talking about a moment where it doesn't matter whether you are a Pharisee or a Sadducee, a Zealot or an Essene, and person of substance or a person of the streets. It doesn't matter what you have done to build up a reputation, to make a name for yourself, to accomplish something, even selfless and kind. In the moment, none of that matters. Standing in that line, you are simply a person in need of grace.

But what is there to gawk at? What is there to mock? For "Jesus also was baptized."

There's the best kind of dignity there is. It is the dignity we proclaim at baptism where God knows no favorites but adopts us all as children. And it is the dignity we must hope for at death where there is nothing left but God.

I remember something that Hayden Hollingsworth told me about his father, also named Hayden. I hope I didn't get this story wrong. I didn't call Hayden to make sure I got it right because I didn't want him to mess up the story as I remember it.

His father, as many of you know, was once the longtime senior minister here at Second Presbyterian Church.

- The Fellowship Hall was built when he was the minister.
- There is a portrait of him in Kirk Hall right next to where my statue will be placed.



His ministry meant something. His life was important to many people.

His son told me that at the end of his life, he had a room in the South Roanoke Nursing Home. Dr. Holly was content. He was grateful for his food, appreciative of those who visited him, and accepting of his circumstances. I am sure he was happy he could live his life and that he had a chance to show his love for God, his family, his friends, and his church. That he was able to accomplish some things that were of help. But it wasn't as if he was looking for thanks. He was at peace needing the care the nursing home had to offer him as he faced what we all will one day have to face, his life's end. Hayden had a dignity when almost all was stripped away.

There is a reason death is called "a second baptism." At death, we are, as they say, as naked as the day we were born. We are stripped
of all pretensions,
of all things earned,
of any reputation gained,
of any right we might think that we have.

We stand there in that line Ruby Turpin sees in her vision in Flannery O'Conner's story, *Revelation*. The line leads into heaven. Ruby sees herself standing in the same line as all the people she has spent her life looking down upon. She feels her virtues burning away. She realizes she has nothing to offer God that she thought that she would have to offer. And all she can think to do in that moment is sing, "Alleluia." Because it's enough. She's enough—for God.

I mean what do you want to hear when your life has been spoken and your story is done? When it is your turn, what could possibly be better to hear than what everyone else, including Jesus, hears from God: "Next."

There is dignity in that. So, go live your life because you know what? Jesus did.

