

January 10, 2010
Year C; First Sunday after the Epiphany
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Christ Church Cathedral

THE POWER OF A LIFE TRANSFORMED

On New Year's Eve, I decided to attend the midnight service at Christ the Lord and St. Michael's, the Roman Catholic church in Trinidad in which I was baptized. I arrived about forty minutes early so I get a good seat. There were several empty pews, so, like a good Episcopalian, I decided to sit toward the back of the church – specifically, in the second to last pew. As people began pouring into the church, a young couple and their little girl sat directly behind me. In contrast to her parents, who were doing quite a bit of talking, the child, surprisingly, was mostly quiet. After several minutes – which must've seemed like an eternity to her – her small, but unmistakable voice cut through her parents' chatter with a pointed question: "Mommy, where's Jesus, Mommy? Where's Jesus, Mommy?"

The Israelites who come to be baptized by John today are also filled with expectation – they are hoping for the Messiah – the one who would rescue them from their religious and political oppressors and usher in a bright, new, freedom-filled future. So when the word of the Lord – which bypasses the religious and political leaders, the Emperor Tiberias, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanius, Annas and Caiaphas – and instead comes to and through John the Baptist, the crowd naturally question whether or not he is their longed for savior. But John immediately sets the record straight – he is not the Messiah. However, he assures them, the one they are longing for is on his way. He is the one, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that will do in, through and for them what neither John nor they can do in, through and for themselves.

After hearing what John has to say, the crowd may have begun to wonder, "So, if it's not John, then who is it? Where is he? How much longer do we have to wait? And how will we know him when he comes?" Sure, John's already given them some clues: the one who's coming is more powerful than John; he will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire, and he will separate the wheat from the chaff, but John doesn't tell them who he is. Like the little girl, the people are left to wonder where Jesus is.

All the while, Jesus is in the midst of them. We know that, but they don't. Even so, when life is looking bleak, when we think we're all alone, or when we are feeling less than hopeful, don't we sometimes ask ourselves where Jesus is?

Where is he when the bills are piling up?
Where is he when our relationships are breaking down?
Where is he when, as someone told me a few days ago, those who do wrong are rewarded and those who do right are punished?

In times like these, we want to know how much longer we have to wait for Jesus, and how will we know him when he shows up. But Jesus already is in our midst – even though we don't always recognize him. Perhaps we don't because he doesn't usually look the way we think he should, speak the way we think he would, or act the way we think he should.

Perhaps it is because he often shows up where we think he wouldn't, through people we think he shouldn't, at times we believe he wouldn't.

Perhaps we've developed an image of him that blinds us from seeing his light. Maybe we are not be that different from the crowd, after all.

In all fairness to the crowd – and to us – to date our experience of Jesus has been limited. Sure, we know that, as a newborn, he was circumcised and named; as a baby, he was presented in the temple; and when he was twelve years old, he sat in the temple with the elders while his parents searched frantically for him. The fact is we don't have many childhood memories of the adult who now emerges from the waters of baptism.

We also don't have many details about his baptism – not from Luke, anyway. But is it possible that, in this very brief story, what Luke tells us about Jesus has the potential to transform our relationship with him? What does it mean for you and for me that this Jesus, who, by coming to be baptized with the rest of the crowd, shows us that he is a Messiah:

Who does not set himself apart from us;
Who does not set himself above us, but
Who comes to us, who understands us, who stands with us?

What does it mean for you and for me that this Jesus, who, by spending time in prayer immediately after he is baptized, shows us that he is a Messiah:

Who appreciates the value of prayer;
Who attends to his relationship with God, and
Who lives in radical dependence upon God?

Recall that before every major decision in his life – before he chooses his disciples, before he teaches them to pray, before he goes to the cross – we find Jesus in prayer. Instead of going it alone, he turns to God for wisdom, guidance, and strength. That level of dependence is so foreign to our sense of independence and self-sufficiency that even Christians find it challenging to be that dependent on another – even if that other is God. So what does Jesus know about God that frees him to rely so heavily on God?

What happens next gives us a clue: While Jesus is praying, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends on him, and a voice from heaven says, “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Now some people may say that that's fine for Jesus, but

they've never had that experience – so they can't really be sure that God loves them, or that God is well pleased with them.

This morning we will welcome three infants – Arianna, Emmi and Ethan – into God's family, the Church. I think it's safe to say that the biological families of these three infants love them simply because they are. In fact, most of us who have children in our lives love them for no other reason than that they are born, they are here, they are ours. They do not have to do anything to earn our love. They already are beloved. We are already well pleased with them. As it is with us, so it is with God.

Presbyterian professor and theologian John Leith reminds us that, “in baptism, (each) child's name is called because our faith is that God thought of (each of them) before (they were born), that God gave to (each one) an identity, an individuality, a name and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. (Arianna, Emmi and Ethan) have their origin, not in the accidents of history and biology, but in the will and intention of the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth.”

None of us likely will doubt that Arianna, Emmi and Ethan are beloved of God. But what about us? Do we believe that we, too, are God's beloved? Do we believe that, not just in our heads, but in our hearts? Because

If we can accept that – that we are all God's beloved, simply because we are God's – it will make all the difference in the world;

If we can believe that, it will bring us freedom – not the outer freedom that the Israelites, as well as many of us, long for – but an inner freedom, one that is not controlled by external circumstances, and

If we can embrace that, it will transform us – transform us into the persons that God created us to be and to live the life that God created us to live.

In his book, *Life with God*, Richard Foster tells the following story: On a November evening in 1758, John Woolman “a successful tradesman in colonial America who (had) pared down his business in order to live simply and fully in response to (God),” preached a powerful, anti-slavery sermon at a Quaker meeting. He then goes to the home of a fellow Quaker, Thomas Woodward, where he plans to spend the night. Upon his arrival, he notices several servants. When he learns that they are slaves, he says nothing. “Later that night, however, he quietly gets out of bed, writes a note to his host(s) explaining why he cannot receive their hospitality, goes to the slave' quarters and pays them for the day's service, and walks out into the night” (p. 151)

John Woolman's awareness and conviction about the evil of slavery didn't happen overnight. It developed over time. As he spent time with God in solitude and silence, as he prayed and fasted, as he worshipped with, and served others, he became increasingly aware of God's “tender mercy and love for (all people), and for all loving creatures” (p. 150). As a result, he “became a gracious yet tireless and uncompromising advocate for concerns such as the abolition of slavery, just relations with Native Americans, an end to taxation in support of war, and refusal to benefit from consumer goods produced by slave labor and unjust trade practices” (p. 150). All of this from a man whose natural tendency

was to be gracious, to not make waves, to not cause offense to others. So what gave him the strength to do what did not come naturally to him? The quiet power of a life transformed by God. As Foster observes, “The quiet power of a life transformed by the grace of God is so explosive that it can redirect the course of human events” (p. 149). So when Thomas Woodward awakes the next morning and discovers John Woolman’s note – in spite of opposition from his family – he immediately frees all of his slaves. The quiet power of a life transformed by God.

So what was Jesus doing during those early years? He was being formed by God, growing in wisdom, and in divine and human favor. During those eighteen years – during those six thousand, five hundred and seventy days, he was being obedient to Joseph and Mary, learning his father’s trade, and spending time with God alone and with others. So when he came up out of the waters of baptism, he already was in relationship with God. And he was ready to reveal the quiet power of a life transformed by God.

Luke tells us that Herod has put John the Baptist in prison. That signals the end of his ministry. Meanwhile, Jesus remains in the crowd – then and now, inviting us into a deeper relationship with the God who calls us beloved, inviting us to shine God’s light in the midst of the darkness; inviting us to cooperate with God’s work in us, so that we can offer our broken world the gift of life - the power of a life transformed by God.