

### *Luke 3:15-17 & 21-22*

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 thong 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."

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."

The season of Epiphany is a season of revelation, of light illuminating our way through this life so we might see the face of God and be strengthened and encouraged. Let us pray.

God, your word is a light making bright our way to you. Open our ears to hear, our minds to understand, our hearts and souls to receive and our life to show forth your blessed word given to us this day through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

I have done some traveling along the coast of California and there are some beautiful sights there. But I think one of the most beautiful sights I have seen is in Virginia not far from the church I served during my first call.

As you drove up this gravel road you would come to a crest in the hill and make a right hand turn.

The road would straighten out in front of you and from that point was the most beautiful scene.

The gravel road continued downhill gradually to where it crossed a stream and then rose again along an old mill on the right and then turned left in front of the old Spitler farm house.

Along the left side of the road there was a pretty steep drop off to a beautiful green pasture where a stream snakes through until it runs by the mill.

There was usually a herd of cattle grazing in the pasture.

This is one of those sights that was photographed and truly did end up in national magazines.

**Now**, if you could close your eyes for just a minute and imagine standing along side that stream with all your family and friends.

You can hear the water flowing by.

Imagine a preacher on the opposite bank and you can hear him saying, shouting in fact:

Repent and be baptized.

Be forgiven all your sins.

I came to prepare the way for the Lord  
and you will see the salvation of our God.

The preacher steps down into the stream and people come and he dunks them into the cold water baptizing them all.

You go down,

You step into the cold water and the preacher dunks you into the water.

A shiver goes through you;  
it could be the cold water,  
it could be something else.

Everyone is being baptized.

You are standing on the bank of the stream, still chilly from the cold water when a man comes and steps into the water with the preacher.

You have seen him around; he looks familiar.

The preacher lowers the man into the water and then all of a sudden your gaze is drawn up to the sky and you see the heavens open up.

Look something is coming down out of the sky!

It lands on the man in the water!

What is that voice?

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

What was that? Who was that?

You remember the preacher’s words:

“...one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...”

This is he!

What has happened here? What does this mean?

The Jordan River much of the time isn't much bigger than the stream flowing through that pasture and by the mill.

Maybe if you let your imagination work for you a little bit you can sense what had happened that day.

Jesus showed up and was baptized.

In these days when you know so much you probably think you understand what it meant that Jesus was baptized.

After all, he was the original Christian wasn't he?

Well, no he wasn't. He was a Hebrew man, a Jew.

Jesus was also without sin you know.

So what does it mean that Jesus was baptized?

He didn't need to repent. He didn't need forgiveness for he was without sin.

What does this mean?

All good questions. The simple answer is that it was all for you.

Jesus' baptism was all for you.

Jesus was baptized for your benefit,

and for the benefit of the people who would come to follow him  
in his ministry.

But the answer to that question goes deeper than that.

A clue to one answer to this question is found in the genealogy of  
Jesus that follows today's passage.

Boring and tedious as you may find this genealogy what you  
discover is a long history of systemic sin in the world, even in  
Jesus' own family.

Luke goes to great lengths to establish Jesus' purity and sinlessness.  
But what is He born into?

Going back to the beginning of time, after God, Adam is the first in  
the line of Jesus' lineage. The one in and with whom sin begins.

As you go along the line you find Noah who lived in a world so  
sinful God had to destroy all of it except Noah and his family.

Jacob who stole his brother's inheritance is in this line.

David who fell far short of God's expectations is an ancestor.

Time and again as you read through the bible and recount the stories of those who fall in the line of Jesus' ancestors, you read stories of their falling short of God's hopes for them.

Jesus was born out of, and into a world of systemic sin, and his baptism is a signal that he understood the full implications of his incarnation,

His being born into flesh and blood in this world.

This condition leading to Jesus' baptism is not related to His personal human will or actions.

Jesus' baptism is a sign that His will is aligned with God's and that He cannot escape the tragic structure of the world into which He was conceived and born,

in which sin is systemic.

Jesus is truly the son of man, Adam, and the son of God.

The choices Jesus made along the way of his life and in his ministry were not made in a moral vacuum,

but surrounded by this system of sin in the world that creates systems of injustice, persecution, oppression, hatred and fear.

But even at that He didn't work only within the prevailing system of the world.

Jesus, in fact, injected this system with something it lacked:

love, compassion, empathy, care, grace, peace and forgiveness.  
He couldn't and didn't leave this system of the world in the condition  
He found it.

When Jesus came close to people and communities they were never  
the same again.

No more than Jesus could, we cannot escape this world or its  
systemic sin.

This sin is what we call original sin.

Martin Luther describes original sin in this way.

“...since the fall of Adam all who are born according to the  
course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all are  
full of evil lust and inclinations from their mother's wombs and  
are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in  
God.”

Luther's language choices may not be heard in the same way they  
were 500 years ago, but the significance of this understanding of sin  
is that we are “conceived and born” into it.

There is nothing we can do to prevent or resolve this condition  
on our own.



We can only rely on the work of Jesus in His incarnation, His death and resurrection,

and our union with Him through baptism.

And we can change the lives of those people and communities to whom we come close just as Jesus did.

In my preparations for worship each week I seek ways to connect the gospel with your lives, and those opportunities come in surprising ways.

At Men's group this morning a question was asked about what the church has to say about what is going on in the world.

The point was made that the church should have something to say about that, even from the pulpit in this sanctuary.

You know what is going on out there.

ISIS and their followers are at war with the world killing people it almost seems at random and unabated. They are the enemy.

Refugees by the millions seek sanctuary in other countries, and we want to say that among them are the enemy.

Killings still lead the news every morning and the killers are the enemy of peace and safety in our community.

Drug dealers poison our communities like never before with the old drugs that have plagued our communities for years, and the new designer drugs that are more addictive and lethal than ever before.

They are the enemy of safety and security in our community.

A year or year-and-a-half ago police busted a meth lab just around the corner from our house in that nice neighborhood we live in right here in Port Orange.

A new level of fear fills the hearts and minds of people every day, and our political system offers no relief and our election processes seem to offer no relief.

I can preach about those things and we can talk about those things, but if we do you have to be ready to hear and talk about how the baptized Jesus responded, and taught His follower's to respond to those things.

Jesus said, "love your neighbor" yes, but He also said, "Love your enemy."

Are you ready to hear that? Are you ready to do that?

Preachers who preach the gospel of Jesus Christ do that at their own peril.

This is what the church is saying about all the terrible things going on in the world, and for many that is not a very satisfying answer.

I lived not more than 100 yards from a meth house.

Where did the world they lived in start and stop—and mine?

Had I done anything to touch the lives of those people in that world, or am I just their judge living around the corner?

Or was there a sense that I was a participant in that world as well as mine,

even if that participation were as an absentee neighbor?

The church reaches out to refugees to support them with money, prayer, as advocates for their sanctuary in new lands they might be able to call home.

Are you ready to hear that, or support that?

We don't get this story in the gospel of Luke, but our own Lord and His family were refugees when they fled to Egypt to escape the slaying of the innocents by Herod.

## ISIS

What can we say?

Here is what Luke's Jesus says.

“But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

I think it is important to say here that there is often an important distinction between what is preached here and what is done in our political system.

You will never hear me preach that we as a nation, or a democrat or a republican out to...

because as we are gathered here we reside in of the  
Kingdom of God,

and we are the presence and body of Christ for our  
neighborhood, community and the world.

This structure of systemic sin in which we live is not always going to respond to world conditions in the way Jesus calls for us to as people of faith.

But here in this place I preach Christ, baptized, crucified, buried and raised again so that each of you know you are saved from the power of original sin by His love and grace in your baptism.

One of the things you have to do as one who is conceived and born into sin, and knowing that you have been saved from that through Jesus Christ,

is figure out how God's love and grace can be manifest in your life, in your neighborhood, in your community, in this world.

You remember our vision statement:

Grow in faith

Lead others to faith

Change the lives of people in our community

And impact the world.

Maybe we should add, "By the power of our baptism and the word of Christ."

That is what we do here as God's holy people.

May the peace of the baptized, crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ be with you always.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen