

## Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

## *Lighting Upon Him*

### Sermon Reflection Notes

All four Gospels begin with John the Baptist who has come to announce a new beginning for the life of the world. John is portrayed as an outsider who wore rough clothing, who ate odd food, and who preached a demanding gospel in shrill and abrasive ways. He is an Old Testament figure who stands with Old Testament prophets who are abrupt, demanding, urgent, sharp and threatening. John immerses people in the waters of the Jordan, letting them shed all that is old and failed in their lives. He offers a baptism of forgiveness of sins. He offers forgiveness and a chance to begin a new life. But it is also a baptism that is not free and unconditional. It requires admitting failure and, only then, to begin again. Those two themes of forgiveness and repentance are classic themes of Old Testament prophets. They understood that a new beginning is not cheap or easy; it requires a serious decision about living life in a new direction.

And then Jesus comes along and lines up with all the rest to wait his turn for baptism. This is an awkward story in the church because we wonder why Jesus would need to be in this line at all. John was telling people they should get baptized because they were sinners and needed to be cleaned (they needed forgiveness and repentance), but Jesus was without sin. So why would Jesus get in that river? It might lead people to think that Jesus was one of the sinners, guilty by association, which would be a bad look. This is a story told in all four gospels, one of the few stories that make it into all four in fact. Which is why many scholars are convinced this is historical fact. Jesus really did join the baptism line. He really did wade into the river with the sinners. The question then might be: Why?

Pastor Ron suggested the answer might be back in the heart of the Christmas Eve sermon and center on one little word...the word "*with*." Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us. And God will go anywhere to be with us, including into the waters of the Jordan with sordid sinners.

Baptism is central to Christian life, not just as a cleansing but as an entry into the shared mission of discipleship. Baptism marks the beginning of us following Jesus; of doing ministry WITH God. And as we are called to do ministry with God, we are called to make disciples, to do ministry with each other, to be together with each other in acts of worship, devotion, justice, and compassion.

We baptize babies because we believe that God's grace is for everyone, and nobody is too young to enter into a covenant with God and with the church. Likewise, we are never too old to become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. We baptize babies, and kids, and youth, and young adults, and old adults, and everyone in between because so long as you have breath, it's never too late to be adopted into this family. Baptisms are the most joyous thing we do as Christians because through physical water we see the way God initiates a covenant with us; we

see the promise of relationship, the means of grace, the story unfolding that God is with us and we are with each other, forever. And we respond by committing ourselves to forever following Jesus's way of love.

"How can we understand these great mysteries of the church? I don't have a clue. I just stand in line and say: 'Here I am, I'm with them, the community of faith.' This explains the mystery, all the love. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed, just watching people in line. It's the most profound thing. You just surrender yourself to it." (Martin Sheen)

## Scripture

*Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (NRSVUE)*

<sup>3</sup>As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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."

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> 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."

## Discussion Questions

1. This week we celebrated the Baptism of the Lord Sunday and reaffirmed our faith by remembering our own baptisms. What emotions, memories, images, etc. did the service bring to mind? What is your baptism story?
2. What life events do we mark through some sort of ritual and how are they marked? How is the renewal of baptism ritual we participated in similar to these other life events?
3. Baptism of the Lord Sunday is foundational to our faith as Christians, and yet it is often overlooked or forgotten. Why is it important that we do this on the second Sunday of January every year?
4. What do United Methodists believe about baptism? (*Just say everything you know or think you know.*)

5. The Bible is full of genealogy and every single family is full of people of great faith and scoundrels...even Jesus's. How could remembering this help us "get in the line" and help us make new disciples as we are called to do at baptism?
6. Pastor Ron keeps mentioning four words that help us evaluate how we are living as faithful baptized disciples of Jesus Christ by loving God and loving neighbor. We even put them on the walls in the narthex. What are those words and how can they be used as a 'rubric' for our baptismal vows?

## Closing Prayer

Holy God, we remember and celebrate how John plunged Jesus into the baptismal waters of the Jordan River, and he came up to be affirmed by your Holy Spirit and you called him beloved. We remember how Jesus was raised up out of the water, and all things were made new. In Jesus's baptism a new world was born—a world of grace and goodness, a world of freedom and hope, a world of justice, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

And we remember that in our own baptism you claimed us, you call us beloved children and you call us to new life. We remember that we are called to new obedience. We remember that we are grafted into your new world order. We remember that we are rooted in your love for all of creation.

We have heard the splash of the water and we pause in this new year to enter, once more, into our covenant to follow Jesus. Give us, we pray, boldness and courage to live lives that proclaim justice, mercy, and love. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ who leads us. Amen.

*"God is WITH us. Remember your baptism and be thankful."*