

The First Sunday after Epiphany: Baptism of Jesus
January 9, 2022
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Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Christmas is behind us. (We have but remnants left, visual reminders of Christmas now past.)

Always, on this First Sunday *after* the Christmas season, we hear an account of Jesus' baptism (either from Matthew or Mark or, as we did this morning, from Luke). It's as if there's not really that much to say about the years between Jesus' birth and his baptism, but there's a lot to say about his baptism and all that follows.

Each gospel account brings a unique vantage, a distinct point of emphasis. What stands out for me about what we just heard here this morning is that Luke doesn't actually tell us about Jesus' baptism. He's more interested in what happens *after* the baptism:

*... and when Jesus also had been baptized **and was praying**, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him ... And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Neither Matthew nor Mark mention Jesus praying. This is unique to Luke. For Luke, it's as if it's the praying that "activates" the baptism and opens a doorway to heaven for Jesus, and helps him hear the voice that says: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Luke actually talks about prayer a lot in his gospel, certainly more than Matthew or Mark. But we should be clear that prayer is not how Jesus ingratiates himself to God. On the heels of all that we've been celebrating these past weeks, it should be clear that what is announced *to* Jesus at his baptism was the truth *about* Jesus from the moment of his conception. That was the good news announced first to Mary and confirmed by her relative Elizabeth. And it was, of course, the great joy proclaimed to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Jesus doesn't pray himself into God's good favor; God's good favor was always the given.

Jesus' baptism was about discovering – or maybe rediscovering – his identity. And from the moment he sees so clearly who he is – and *whose* he is – Jesus becomes a beacon of God's love for everyone he encounters. It shows up in every interaction with every person he met. It shines through the stories he loved to tell. It is the mark of the life he lived and gave us.

And, again, as Luke intimates, this is all set in motion for Jesus by prayer.

I'd love to know more about that. I'd love to know what words Jesus said. I'd love to know if he got down on his knees and closed his eyes – or if he stood up and looked around. The thing of it is, though, we're not told what Jesus prayed – or how he prayed – only *that* he prayed.

And maybe that's enough. (it's all we're given, in any event.)

When I've offered newcomer classes in the past, I've shared a reflection about prayer by the Presbyterian preacher and writer Frederick Buechner.

We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. The odd silence we fall into when something very beautiful is happening, or something very good or very bad. The "Ah-h-h-h!" that sometimes floats up out of us as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the skyrocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds we use for sighing with over our own lives. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to ourselves, but to something even more familiar than ourselves and even more strange than the world. ⁱ

I love how Buechner begins, with reassuring words that that we all pray – whether we call it that or not – because a great many of us, I suspect, have a hard time believing it. Some of those who most inspire me admit they're bad at prayer. (I think of Barbara Brown Taylor ⁱⁱ and David Lose ⁱⁱⁱ come to mind.) But such confessions also reassure us that we really do pray even so.

Partly, it's a matter of definitions. The Catechism in our Prayer Book says this about prayer:

- Q. What is prayer?
- A. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.

That's how the Catechism, in its traditional question and answer format, begins its discussion of prayer. And as it goes on, one of the points it makes is that there is more than one way to pray.

- Q. What are the principal kinds of prayer?
- A. The principal kinds of prayer are adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition.

To offer multiple options is no small point, in and of itself.

That said, I wouldn't worry too much about the short list in our Catechism. Or the neatly defined definitions for each of the named kinds of prayer. I mean, if it helps it helps (and that's great!), but the larger takeaway, I think, is for us be freed up from thinking of prayer as something that can only be done a certain way ... or that there's only one right way to pray.

The old Nike ad campaign pertains: "Just do it." That's the example Jesus gives us in this morning's gospel. We need not worry too much about how Jesus prayed or what he said as he prayed, it seems. It's enough to know *that* he prayed.

And it behooves us to do the same.

Not to curry God's favor. Jesus didn't pray himself into God's favor; God's good favor was always the given. And God's good favor is still the given for us. We pray to open ourselves up enough to hear God say to us what God first said to Jesus: "You are my child, my beloved."

This morning, I want to encourage you to pray. Take some time – after you go home – to pray. Be intentionally still. Whatever your prayer looks like, feels like, sounds like ... pray.

I'm suggesting not merely that you say a prayer. It's not the same thing. Prayer, as I'm thinking of it, is more about whatever helps you plug into the radical truth – usually unrecognized – that we are already connected and interconnected with God, creation, and every living creature.^{iv}

Let me offer a few modest suggestions:

Take your bulletin home with you today. And then, sometime after you've gone home, open it up and reflect on the questions asked as part of the Baptismal Covenant. Ponder what it means to commit to doing what we can – relying still on God to help us where we can't. And then ask yourself, what might it look like ...

- ❖ to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship ...
- ❖ to persevere in resisting evil ...
- ❖ to proclaim by word and example the good news ...
- ❖ to seek and serve Christ in all persons ...
- ❖ to strive for justice and peace among all people ...

If you resolve to do one new thing in response to just one of those questions, that's prayer.

Or maybe it would be good to get comfortable and close your eyes and imagine God as a loving parent, with safe arms enfolding you in. Not everyone was raised by loving, safe parents, so it can be a stretch. But if it's possible to do, know yourself to be a child, safely enfolded within God's loving embrace.

And mull over this: no matter how often we fall short or fail, nothing we do – or fail to do – can take away what God gives to us as a gift of love. I love how our Prayer Book puts it: "The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble" (p. 298). Chew on that awhile.

That's prayer.

We have easy access to water, mostly failing even to notice, failing to be amazed that every drop is a miracle. Every time we wash our hands is an opportunity to remember the gifts of God that give us life and the promises God makes to us in baptism to give us new life.

The next time you wash your face, you could look your reflection in the mirror and remind yourself: "I am God's beloved child, put here to share that love with every other child I meet."

That's prayer.

Martin Luther passionately reminded people to "Remember your baptism!" Most of us were baptized as infants or children, as were most folks in Luther's time, as well. His point was not simply to try to imagine that day when our parents would have dressed us up in a white baptismal gown. He wanted us to remember each day who we are, and *whose* we are, and how beloved we are.

Ozzie Smith, a UCC pastor/preacher, insists that baptism sets us free from every lesser allegiance. It tells us who – and *whose* – we are. This is how he puts it: "My ancestors ... stole away into the midnight to hear slave preachers remind them, 'You're not slaves. You're God's children.'"

Remember your baptism. That's prayer.

It's a stretch for Episcopalians, but memorizing a verse from the Bible can become prayer. Take some care in selecting the verse, but you could do worse than the opening verses from our first reading from Isaiah this morning:

Thus says the LORD,
... who created you, O Jacob,
... who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

There's no mention of a baptism of any sort, certainly not a Christian baptism, but these verses are full of our baptismal promise, that God claims us and promises never to abandon us thereafter. Memorize words such as these, so that you hold them fast when you need them most, when life feels like overwhelming waters or all-consuming flames.

That's prayer.

Those are a few possibilities. They are all prayer.

But my list is only suggestive, of course. By design.

We don't know how Jesus prayed – or what he prayed – only *that* he prayed. And so we are encouraged to do the same, not imagining that there's only one right way to pray. There are many ways, so long as they help us take in and embrace the voice that says to you what was first said to Jesus: "You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

ⁱ Frederick Buechner @ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/4/25/prayer>. Originally published in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1973), p. 70.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Practice of Being Present to God: Prayer," in *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2009), p.176, writes:

I am a failure at prayer. When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask about her favorite dish. My mind starts scrambling for ways to hide my problem ...

I would rather confess that I am a rotten godmother, that I struggle with my weight, that I fear I am overly fond of Bombay Sapphire gin martinis than confess that I am a prayer-weakling. To say I love God but I do not pray much is like saying I love life but I do not breathe much. The only way I have found to survive my shame is to come at the problem from both sides, exploring two distinct possibilities: 1) that prayer is more my idea of prayer and 2) that some of what I actually do in my life may constitute genuine prayer.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose @ <https://www.davidlose.net/2013/02/prayer-as-connection-and-communion/> picks up on teaching of Richard Rohr:

Richard's view [is] that prayer can be *anything* – anything done in a state of communion and connection. Communion and connection with God, with others, and with this world that God has given us to love and care for.

I love that. Work, play, gardening, walking, taking out the trash, studying for finals, hanging with friends, grocery shopping, volunteering...it can all be prayer. Which makes prayer more accessible to many of us. As Richard says, prayer doesn't have to be only words. Words are great, but prayer can be more than words. Prayer doesn't have to be only a left-brain thing. Prayer can be a place where contemplation and action meet. I love that because I tend to keep in motion and regularly find it difficult to find what I think of as the appropriate quiet time for traditional prayer. This invites me to think differently about praying in, with, and through the things I regularly do.

^{iv} Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Practice of Being Present to God: Prayer," in *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2009), p.178, writes:

Brother David [Steindl-Rast] was the first person to tell me that prayer is not the same thing as prayers. Prayers are important, he said. Saying the Psalms in the morning is a good way to head into the day more prayerfully. So is going to church, where I can add my voice to those of a whole congregation aiming to woo God's ears with their ancient, beautiful cadences. Still, prayer is more than saying prayers at set time. Prayer, according to Brother David, is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment I am in, then I am in prayer. Prayer is happening, and it is not necessarily something that I am doing. God is happening, and I am lucky enough to know that I am in The Midst.

She goes on (pp. 178-179, to tell a story of Brother Lawrence, remembered as a "saint" because he found washing dishes a holy activity. But he himself, it seems, struggled with the spiritual life and with prayers:

Brother Lawrence readily admitted that books on the spiritual life served only to confuse him. He was also no good at set prayers. While he dutifully completed the three hours of prayer and meditation required of all the monks in his order each day, he confessed that afterward he could not have said what it had all been about.