

January 10, 2010

Baptism of the Lord

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22 and Isaiah 43: 1-7

*"A striking resemblance"*

It never fails! Each year as we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, mental images of the DeBerg cousins come to mind. Though both are now teen-agers, in my mind's eye they are as they were on that day...little boys ages five and seven. On the remembered Sabbath the two of them were part of the group of children standing around the font, dipping their hands into the water and listening to the pastor talk about baptism. Since I've shared the story with you on past occasions, I'll merely summarize. Ben, the older of the two, was sure that he had not been baptized (He had been!) but knew that he'd had a shot for measles. Kollin, following a prayer, raced from the chancel down the aisle to his parents, clenched fist held high and in a stage whisper repeated: "I'm holdin' on, holdin' on to the wata'!"

Officiating at baptisms is both a joy and an honor. Parents often have tears in their eyes, grandparents are puffed up like Toad with pride, and other members of the congregation are smiling as they remember past celebrations at the font and look forward to future ones. The older sister of a little boy I baptized right here a few years ago never fails to tell me whenever we meet that her brother dirtied his pants during the baptism! Can't you just imagine how many times she'll remind him of his actions as they grow into adulthood?!?

Our baptismal liturgy begins in this way: "Hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" A few scriptural passages are then shared, the liturgy continues to unfold and all of us are invited to remember our own baptisms.

Since most of us were baptized as infants, there is no conscious memory. Rather we rely on people to fill in the blanks, as undoubtedly the aforementioned girl will for her younger brother. A good friend of my mother made comment about both my baptism and that of her daughter after Mother's funeral service. I had officiated and the daughter, also an ordained clergy woman, had assisted. So it was that the friend said with some pride: "There certainly must have been something in the waters of your baptisms!" Both of us had been at the same font years earlier though not on the same day.

The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams, pastor of Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, recalls a five-year old boy in the church where she first served as a pastor. His parents had deliberately waited to have their child baptized until he was older in order that he might have a bit of understanding and memory of the event. Rev. Adams wrote: "So one Sunday after worship—the Sunday before the baptism was scheduled—Max, his mom, his dad, and I gathered around the font. I sensed that Max was a little dubious about the whole affair, but I dove in anyway. I took the top off the baptismal font, reached my hand down into the dry

bowl, and pretended to scoop up a palm full of water. I placed my dry hand on his dry head and said brightly, 'Next week, we'll be doing this with real water.' Max folded his arms across his chest, looked me straight in the eye, and announced, 'No way, lady. No way.' Eventually Max relented, even as my belief in the value of infant baptism deepened considerably." (Day1.org)

Although most of the baptisms in which I've been privileged to participate have been at the font of one church or another, there have been a few exceptions. A ten year-old boy in Nebraska asked that we go to the river which we did. Obviously the baptism took place during the summer since Nebraska winters are a lot like the ones in Minnesota! Anyway, the boy, his parents, sponsors, a few friends and I went to the banks of the Missouri River in Tekamah, Nebraska, slipped off shoes and waded into the water. My guess is that the boy-now-an-adult remembers the occasion. I obviously do.

On two different occasions there were baptisms of infant sons at Clear Lake, Iowa. Then, at two other times, infant sons were baptized in the Iowa River behind the home of their great grandparents. Though the boys have little if any conscious memories, pictures of the occasions captured the events for time and eternity.

The truth of the matter is that most of us, including seminary trained pastors and erudite Christian educators, don't have a clue as to what happens in the waters of baptism. The mystery embraces while actual understanding eludes. For Jesus, baptism was consecration and revelation of identity. And the effects of the water were immediate while for others acceptance and transformation are often slow to be realized. The beauty is that God is ever-faithful and patient!

On Friday *The Free Press* carried an Associated Press article about Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, a facility in which prisoners are earning degrees in ministry. I first became aware of life in Angola some years ago when I read about a man on death row who had become an award-winning author. Angola is also the place where Sister Helen Prejean ("*Dead Man Walking*") ministers. While reading about the men who are working on or have completed their studies, it occurred to me that there could very well be many skeptics in society at large. But God is alive and well and forgiving. The article ended with the thoughts of Paul Will, a 36 year-old inmate from New Jersey who is serving a life sentence for aggravated kidnapping. "We made mistakes and we ended up here," he said. "But our lives haven't ended. We can still do some good in this world."

When Jesus stepped out of the River Jordan, "a voice came from heaven" and announced: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased...You are in my image."

And all of God's children are created in the image of God or so we are told. Surely this means that at our best we bear some resemblance to the almighty.

In the opinion of many, including myself, the Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock is one of the best preachers in the world. With quiet dignity, compassion and humor, he shares the gospel of Christ through story. Recently I came across a personal account of his that is included in the volume *Craddock Stories*. Now widely circulating on the internet, the sermon/story entitled *"Who's your daddy?"* is considered a kind of urban legend.

Anyway, it seems that while vacationing in his native state of Tennessee one year, Fred and his wife were having dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. While eating they noticed a distinguished looking elderly gentleman going from table to table greeting diners. Eventually the man found his way to the place where the Craddocks were eating. After greeting them he announced: "I am from around these parts. See that mountain over there? Well, I grew up in that area. My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us and everywhere I was asked the same question: 'Hey, boy, Who's your daddy?' Whether I was at school, in the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question, 'Who's your daddy?' So I tried to hide from everybody, especially at school. At lunch and at recess I actually hid.

"When I was around twelve years of age, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, though, there was a new preacher and he said the benediction so fast that I didn't have a chance to escape. Before I knew it, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he, like all the others, was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of...'. And then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life."

Before the gentleman could move on to another table, Dr. Craddock asked: "What is your name?"

The answer was: "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper." Then it was that Dr. Craddock vaguely remembered that when he was a child himself his own father talked "about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper." (Day1.org)

It's impossible for me to say what transpired early in the lives of the men who are serving life sentences in Angola State Penitentiary. No matter the circumstances they may have encountered, there is never an excuse for heinous crimes. It's just that they, too, are children of God and the good news is that God keeps calling us by name. Jerome Derricks, now serving a life sentence, says that he heard God's call early on in his life, a call that he wishes he had heeded sooner. He admits: "I ran from my calling all my life. But I like to put it like this: God finds people wherever they go." Having successfully completed his college work and graduated, he now serves as minister in the prison reception center where new prisoners first

come. He also ministers to 98 men on death row, persons to whom a previous minister told they “should get right with God before they got the bug juice squirted in their veins.” Derrick says: “When I talk to them, they know I’m for real because of what I went through to reach this point.”

The prophet Isaiah tells us what the LORD announced: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

Some Tennessee preacher told a young boy that he was a child of God and bore a striking resemblance. Each and every one of us, despite backgrounds and flaws, when looking into the waters of the font is able to see a face that also bears resemblance. And, after dipping our hands into the water, we are assured that God is holding onto us just as surely as young Kollin held onto the wata’!