

Galatians 3:23-29

Mark 1:4-11

January 10, 2021

The Baptism of the Lord

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Howard Washington Thurman died forty years ago, yet his writings continue to inspire people, as does his legacy as a Christian preacher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. In 1973, Thurman published a book called *The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations*. In my December newsletter article, I shared one of his writings called “I Will Light Candles This Christmas.” In that writing, Thurman speaks of candles of joy, hope, courage, peace, grace, and love shining in difficult days. The first line reads, “I will light candles this Christmas.” The last line carries the thought further: “Candles that will burn all year long.”

On Wednesday, January 6, I saw a Facebook post from Janet Stark that included pictures of a beautiful wooden star and wooden figures of the three wise men with their gifts. Janet’s message said, “The work of Christmas begins. Happy Epiphany.” Janet’s post reminded me of another of Howard Thurman’s poems from *The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations*, which I have liked for many years. The title is “The Work of Christmas.”

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.*

We won’t sing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” for another year. The Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, The 2020 Christmas Star, has disappeared from the western night sky. The wise men with their gifts and their camels and the shepherds with their sheep have been wrapped in tissue paper and put in the attic until December.

The Twelve Days of Christmas have come and gone. Now, the work of Christmas not only begins, but must continue all year long.

As I said last Sunday, January 6 is the Day of Epiphany, “Old Christmas.” In Western Christianity, Epiphany marks the visit of the wise men to the Christ child and the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles. So, Epiphany is also known as “Three Kings Day.” In Eastern Christianity, however, January 6 traditionally commemorates the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River, when Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is revealed to the world.

On the church calendar, today is designated as the Baptism of the Lord. Not only do we remember Jesus’ baptism, we are invited and encouraged to remember our own baptisms and their significance for our lives. According to the Presbyterian Mission website, “The Baptism of the Lord is closely related to Epiphany and should be considered in relation to that feast. Jesus’ ministry to bring in God’s rule was inaugurated in his baptism. As he came out of the water, the Spirit rested on Jesus and a sign of God’s approval was heard. On this day, we celebrate not only Jesus’ baptism but our own as well, for our baptism is rooted in Christ. Baptism joins us to Christ and his church, and with all of the baptized we are called to share in Jesus’ ministry. In the waters of baptism we are buried with Christ, cleansed of our sins, and raised to share in his resurrection. The Spirit is given to us and we are declared the children of God.”¹

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus goes down to the river to pray and to get baptized by John, who is preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Did Jesus need to get baptized for the forgiveness of sins? No. But he knew it was the right thing to do. As someone has said, Jesus’ baptism was “an act expressing the obedience and the sacrifice that would shape the course of Jesus’ life, ministry, and death.”²

Mark’s gospel moves along at a fast pace. There is no Christmas story with a baby in the manger, shepherds in the field, wise men with their gifts, and a star in the sky. Instead, Jesus appears on the banks of the Jordan River, ready to get baptized by John. But that’s not to say there’s no Christmas message in this story today. When Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism, he saw the heavens ripped apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove and heard a voice saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:10-11)

In our epistle lesson this morning from Paul’s letter to the churches in the province of Galatia, we heard about the difference baptism makes in our lives. In his commentary on the gospel of Mark, Lamar Williamson points out the parallels between Jesus’ baptism and our own baptisms.

* In Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ baptism establishes his identity — “You are my Son, the Beloved.”

* In Paul’s letter, through our baptisms our identities are established — “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

* In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is who God says he is — “You are my Son, the Beloved.”

* In Paul’s letter, we are who God says we are — “children of God, heirs according to the promise.”

Four verses after the baptism story, Jesus delivers his inaugural address, and it's only nineteen words long: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) Then Jesus begins his public ministry of teaching and healing and forgiving and accepting and proclaiming the kingdom of God. As another Christian writer observes, "Again and again, as Jesus casts out unclean spirits, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and welcomes the outcast, he will only do to others what has already been done to him, telling them via word and deed that they, too, are beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased."³

As Jesus began to do the work of Christmas thirty years after the shepherds and the wise men visited him in Bethlehem, he did so, knowing he was a beloved child of God, knowing that God was with him, knowing that he had been called to walk in God's ways, knowing that in his baptism he had identified himself with us in every way. As we celebrate Jesus' baptism today and remember our own baptisms (whether we actually remember the event itself or not!), we are reminded that we are beloved children of God, that God is with us, that we have been called to walk in God's ways, that we have Christmas work to do.

So think about your own baptism. Maybe you remember "going under the water and coming up again." Maybe you've been told throughout your life about being presented as a baby. Think about what difference your baptism can make from this point going forward. This week I read these words in a sermon about Jesus' baptism and our baptism: "No matter where you are baptized . . . whether it's in front of the same font where your grandmother and mother were baptized or whether it's by the banks of the river, or whether it's standing in the sanctuary of a place where even you can hardly believe you've found a home . . . no matter where it is, the water and the promise and the prayer take just a few moments. But truly saying yes to our baptism is the daily work of the rest of our lives. It is saying yes to the world and yes to a life torn open by the love of God."⁴

Our Affirmation of Faith today is called "The Litany of Walking Wet." (see below) I have used this litany for many years in Confirmation Class. As I was searching through my Confirmation files for the litany, I came across another affirmation of faith that I have also used with our confirmands over the years. As I close with these words, think about your baptism. Think about who you are as a beloved child of God. Think about the work of Christmas we are all called to do.

By the Holy Spirit, I am made one with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am baptized into Christ's body, the church.

As a member of this community,

I trust in God's Word,

share in the Lord's Supper,

and turn to God in prayer.

As I grow in grace and knowledge,

I am led to do the good works that God intends for my life.

Let us pray: Gracious God, by water and the Spirit you claimed us as your own, cleansing us from sin, and giving us new life. Continue the good work you have begun in us and guide us by your Spirit, that we may grow in faith, hope, and love, be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, and strive for justice and peace in all the earth. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “God’s rule inaugurated,” An excerpt from the Companion to the Book of Common Worship (Geneva Press, 2003, 148) at www.presbyterianmission.org.

² Barbara Sholis, “A watery solution: Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5,” December 18, 2002, www.christiancentury.org.

³ David Lose, “Baptism of Our Lord B: Baptism & Blessing,” January 5, 2015 at www.davidlose.net.

⁴ Maxwell Grant, “Torn Open, By God,” January 11, 2015 at www.day1.org.

The Litany of Walking Wet

L: Where are we going?

All: We’ve left the country where sin is sovereign.

L: Can we still live in our old house then?

All: No! We’ve packed up and left there for good.

L: How do I get to this new place?

All: That’s what happens in baptism. We go under the water and leave the old country of sin behind.

L: What happens when I come up out of the water?

All: We enter into the new country of grace — a new life in a new land! We’re walking wet!

L: What is it like being in the water?

All: It is like the burial of Jesus.

L: What is it like being raised up out of the water?

All: It is like the resurrection of Jesus. God raises us into a light-filled world, so that we can see where we’re going in our new grace-sovereign country.

L: Tell me again.

All: Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life — no longer at sin’s beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ’s sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection.

L: We have new life in Jesus?

All: Yes! We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us.

L: So that’s what this is all about.

All: Yes. From now on, think of it this way. Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That’s what Jesus did. I’m walking wet and speaking the language of grace.

Praise God!