

*Isaiah 64:1-4*

*Luke 3:15-22*

*January 10, 2016*

***The Baptism of the Lord***

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

**CLAIMED AND CALLED**

***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.***

Dr. Fred Craddock died last March at the age of eighty-six. For many years he was professor of preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. He was ranked as one of America's greatest preachers and was known for his "folksy" preaching style. He told many stories in his sermons. Here is one of them:

One evening Dr. Craddock and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smoky Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself.

"I am from around these parts," he said. "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, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone.

"In my early teens, 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, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was.

"Well, boy,' he said, '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 church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked the elderly man. He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper."

Dr. Craddock, who was from Tennessee, said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of the state. His name was Ben Hooper.<sup>1</sup>

When I baptize someone — adult, teenager, or infant — I call the person by name and say these words: "Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Then I call the person's name again, and say, "Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." When I baptize someone, I do not "christen" the person — that is, I do not name the person. The parents did that. But calling the person by name

is an important and meaningful part of the baptism service. It reminds us how God calls each of us by name, as we affirmed to begin our worship this morning: *God is with us always and calls us each by name. When we pass through difficulties and stress, God is with us and calls us by name. When we are discouraged and feel lost and alone, God is with us and calls us by name, and heals us. Blessed be God who knows us and calls us by name.*

Someone asked this week, “What does Jesus’ baptism mean?” That’s a good question, especially considering that John was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus certainly didn’t need to be baptized in order to be forgiven for his sins. And yet he went forward and went under the waters of baptism. In Matthew’s version of this story, John protests and says to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:14-15)

Luke is a bit more subtle, but his point is well-made and powerful. Just as Luke tells about Jesus’ birth in one simple sentence (“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Luke 2:7), he very simply reports about Jesus’ baptism, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.” (Luke 3:21-22)

Jesus is one of the many people who were baptized. Then again, Jesus wasn’t just *any* person who was baptized out there in the wilderness. We have to listen to the rest of the story: “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” (Luke 3:22) We already know that! That’s what we celebrated just two weeks ago — the birth of God’s Son!

But it’s not as if Luke has forgotten what he wrote in his Christmas story. Instead, Luke is telling us the answer to the question, “What does Jesus’ baptism mean?” This baptism story is about who Jesus is — and who Jesus is is all about what Jesus does. He is the royal Son of God, the obedient servant of God, and he is the one who brings salvation. In this story, we find out how God’s Holy Spirit anoints and empowers Jesus for his ministry and his service, all the way to the cross at Calvary.

In light of Jesus going under the waters of baptism, we would do well to ask, “What does **our** baptism mean?” Jesus’ baptism gives us some clues.

Baptism teaches us who we are. 1 John 3:1-2 says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

That preacher in the rural Tennessee church was wise enough and caring enough to say to that shamed, scared young man, “Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance. Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.” That would be a good benediction at a baptism service!

Every time I baptize someone, I say to the congregation, “As we celebrate baptism today, let us remember with joy our own baptisms.” You may not actually remember your baptism. I certainly don’t — I was only three months old! But I **know** I was baptized in May 1956. But, even more important than that, I know that I **am** baptized. It is said that when Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, was hiding for his life in a castle, he would become discouraged and filled with doubts. In these times of temptations, Luther is said to have walked around the castle grounds saying, “Martin, you have been baptized!” In one of his writings, Luther said, “We must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: ‘But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in body and soul.’”<sup>2</sup>

The next time I baptize someone and ask you to remember your own baptisms with joy, here’s something practical you can do. Say to yourself, “I am God’s beloved child, called and sent to make a difference in the world.” If you have never been baptized and would like to make that commitment and find out what it means to be claimed and called by God in baptism, I would love to talk with you about that. Please be in touch with me.

When you remember with joy your baptism, remember that, in baptism, “you have been marked by the sign of the cross, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and sent into the world to share God’s love in word and deed.” We sang about that very thing just before the gospel reading: “All newborn servants of the Crucified bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name.”

When Jesus came up from the waters of baptism, he was anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit and commissioned for his ministry in the world. In baptism, the church anoints and equips believers for the work of God’s kingdom in the world. The same Holy Spirit power that rested upon Jesus at the Jordan is available to you and me today so we can make a difference in the world.

You found an insert in today’s bulletin. In a few minutes, during our offering time, I will ask you to write down your thoughts about the two questions and to put the papers in the plates as part of your offering this morning. Next Saturday, your elders and I will spend several hours on retreat here at the church. We will pray, read God’s Word, sing, enjoy fellowship, and seek God’s wisdom and guidance for the coming year. Part of what we’re going to do is work on what we’re calling a “missional” budget. We’re asking for your input and suggestions. What does our church do that is most meaningful to you? What does our church do that makes a difference in the lives of people? Trust me, what you share with us will be given careful and prayerful attention and consideration.

In the Presbyterian Church, we say that our faith is always personal, but never private. We can say the same thing about our baptisms. Baptism is personal — the individual is called by name. But baptism is never private — we baptize in the presence

of the congregation and baptism means being included in the work and mission of the congregation. In baptism, we are claimed by God and called to live up to our names as God's children. As someone has said, we are claimed by Someone special and called to do something special.

Josh is one of the therapists at Vidant Rehabilitation on Norwood Street here in Wallace, where I have been doing my physical therapy. He and his wife are expecting their second child. There is a chart on the office door on which anyone who wants to can write their predictions about the baby. There are two columns — one pink, one blue. This week Josh told folks they had found out the baby is a girl. Some of the staff members were checking to see who had made that prediction.

You can also suggest names. A couple of the female therapists have already announced the baby girl should be named after them! As far as I know, Josh and his wife have yet to announce their baby girl's name. So it remains a mystery.

But our name is not a mystery — “Child of the covenant, children of God.” Despite the damage sin has done, we still bear a striking resemblance to our Heavenly Father. We are still claimed and called as children of God to make a difference in the world. Let us remember our baptism and live into our calling.

***Let us pray: Holy God, you have made us in your image, and we are precious in your sight. Jesus Christ, Son of God, we stand at the river, ready to share in your baptism. Holy Spirit, Dove of Peace, set us on fire with the power of your love. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I have read this story in many places. This version was taken from a sermon by Rev. Joanna Adams, “God Believes In You,” at [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

<sup>2</sup>Cited in “Baptism as Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Care,” by John T. Pless, at [www.ctsfw.edu](http://www.ctsfw.edu).