

To Be Claimed and to Receive
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
Baptism of Our Lord Sunday

Scripture: Luke 3:21-22, Acts 8:14-17

One of the things I am grateful for at the start of a new year is the presence of our Office Manager Leslie Gipple. Leslie brings new energy, ideas, foresight and broad ability to us, and I'm sure she would want me to say how much she enjoys working with so many of you. Our ministries are enabled by her skills and genuine caring.

One of the weekly tasks Leslie and I share is the preparation of the worship bulletin. It serves as a regular reminder that we humans rarely, if ever, achieve perfection. But, as with God's grace, there is always the next week.

Occasionally, someone sends me some bloopers from church newsletters. I know those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. But I have to admit church bulletin bloopers always make me chuckle. I am a lifelong fan of the Andy Griffith Show and church bulletin bloopers bring back the same sense of innocent but humorous imperfection.

For example, one church bulletin proclaimed: "The sermon this morning will be: 'Jesus Walks on the Water.' The sermon tonight will be: 'Searching for Jesus.'" (That's the way it is sometimes, isn't it?)

Another bulletin noted: "Our youth basketball team is back in action this Wednesday at 8 p.m. in the recreation hall. Come and watch us kill Christ the King."

Around here at Caldwell, my number-one rule for church volunteers is 'No Burnout.' It seems another pastor may have inadvertently said the same thing when he wrote: "Don't let worry kill you off – let the church help."

At another church, one educator wrote: "For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs."

And then there was this one – perhaps the occasional, subconscious wish of all women of the church. It read: "Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands."

As these bloopers show us, sometimes the English language gets away from us, despite our best efforts. In any kind of writing, one of the best tips I ever heard was that the key to good writing is in the verbs. Verbs bring language to life and stimulate the reader's mind. Verbs serve as the paintbrush, providing the bold strokes that animate all the words that come before or after.

This morning we heard two readings of scripture from the lectionary. In seminary, I was cautioned against trying to preach about two scripture passage at once. Stick to one, my professor counseled.

But today's readings from the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts echo each other in a way that calls us to look at them side by side. Both recount notable moments but do so in a matter of fact way. More important, they show us a sequence of events that relate to every believer. What's more, they give us verbs that say a lot about how God relates to us and how we can relate to God.

The result is a pattern of living – one that starts when we are claimed by God and then continues for all of our days in how we receive the Holy Spirit, which equips us to live the Christian life. Sometimes with scripture, grammar provides insight into theology. So, we might ask, what meaning lies in these verbs - to BE claimed and, then, to receive?

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What happens in this passage from Luke happens suddenly.

“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.”

With that, we have to stop and say, “What? Say that again. I'm not sure I got it all.”

“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.”

Sometimes the writers of scripture give us clues that something big is about to happen - angels and trumpets, burning bushes, crowds gathered. But this is such a tightly written, event-filled sequence that what happens next almost slips right past us.

“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.”

One commentator points out that, among many of the things going on here, Jesus seems to simply come forward with a group of people and to be baptized. Theologians debate about why and whether Jesus needed to be baptized. In his divinity, after all, he was without sin. Some say he was baptized to show his solidarity with humanity. For now, though, we will leave that debate to them because it is the sequence of events and actions that we're after.

First, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. Then Jesus turns to God in prayer. Then the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. If you look at the cover of your bulletin today, you will find the seal of the Presbyterian Church USA. There at the top is the dove, descending downward. In this, we see again that life with God works along two planes, both the vertical and horizontal. In Christ, those two planes intersect.

Before leaving this Lukan passage, let's take note of its last line. “And a voice came down from heaven, ‘You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ “ As one commentator writes, Jesus' life changed that day, just as it did on the baptism day for all of us – changed because Christ was claimed by God, but also changed because of God's affirming words, words we all long to hear.

Friends, even on our worst days, God says to us, ‘You are mine and I love you.’ The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen notes that we hear so many other voices, the ones that shout: “You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody.”¹

Those are only the voices of the world, though. As Nouwen writes, “We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives.” That's the truth we should claim for ourselves.

As I thought about that, I wondered whether we should make an addition to how we dismiss the children to Sunday School during worship, to ensure they know they are loved by God but also by each of us. With them, we might borrow God's own affirmation: “You are our children and we love you. With you, we are very pleased.” Food for thought, anyway.

¹ Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World, Henri J.M Nouwen, p.31

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Turning to the passage in Acts, chapter 8, it shares the same understated tone as the passage in Luke, equally brief, equally matter-of-fact sounding. It comes in those exciting but unprecedented days after Pentecost when the church was being born even in the most unlikely places, even in Samaria.

“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.”
(Acts. 8:14-17)

Did you hear the same sequence as we heard in Luke? Baptism followed by prayer followed by reception of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, we should not mistake this as a simple formula, an easy recipe that we can follow, as if baking a cake. We dare not try to reduce the mystery of God’s adoption of us in our baptism and God’s presence with us in the Holy Spirit in such a way.

But perhaps we can find clues to God’s ways – and our own orientation to God – in the verbs.

In baptism, we are the recipient of God’s initiative, we are on the receiving end of that transitive verb. As I’ve said before, God is the subject of the sentence and we are the object. God claims us. The next part of this sequence of our lives is prayer, strengthened by the knowledge of God’s word and worship, perhaps not when we are infants, but in later years as we strive to grow in our relationship with our creator. Then we receive the Holy Spirit, or we can turn that sentence around and see it as it happened with Jesus, the Spirit acted, the Spirit came down to us, of God’s initiative, not ours.

We might even pay a little attention to the Greek here. The verb Acts uses can mean either take or receive, but the writer is careful to use the form that expresses the act of receiving in this instance.

As I’ve said before, we Presbyterians often don’t quite know what to do with the Holy Spirit. Our denominational ancestors spent centuries focusing on our brokenness instead of the grace through which the Spirit comes.

There is a joke about the old Presbyterian church in Scotland. It was said that the church was the place to come to bow down, to writhe in apology and to gnash your

teeth. And if you were too old to have teeth, the church would happily supply you with a set to gnash.

Listen to this line from the Scots Confession of 1560:

“For by nature, we are so dead, blind, and perverse, that neither can we feel when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ quicken that which is dead, remove the darkness from our minds, and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of his blessed will.”

You can almost hear the gnashing teeth, can't you?

To be sure, we still must confess our sins, as we do each week. But in more recent years, our creeds have focused more on celebrating what is possible when we receive the Spirit, which draws us back to the question of how we do that, how we receive the Holy Spirit. Another one of our creeds states that we receive the Holy Spirit when we receive the Word of God – as written in scripture ... ad known in and through worship and study ... and, most important, though Jesus Christ.

Finally then, can we know the Spirit is with us?

Perhaps the answer is that it is all in where we look. The wonderful British writer and theologian C.S. Lewis thought about it this way: We can't see the Holy Spirit for the very fact that we are always looking for it, or him or her, Lewis offers.

We think of God the Mother-Father-Creator as something “out there,” *in front* of us, Lewis wrote. We think of God the Son as someone standing at our side, helping us pray and live. So then, Lewis concludes, we can think of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, even as something inside of us, God's presence in us, that even though we are blind, as the old Scots wrote, God in the Spirit guides, directs and draws out the best of our nature, the part of us that was created in God's image in the first place.

Thus, we can indeed give thanks for the Spirit in the kind of confession that celebrates what we can do in and through the Spirit, as stated in these verbs from the Brief Statement of Faith, written in 1983, which states that the Spirit gives us courage:

to **pray** without ceasing,
to **witness** among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior
to **unmask** idolatries in Church and culture

to **hear** the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to **work** with others for justice, freedom and peace.

Last week, I asked you what words we as a church should seek to embody, just as God embodied grace in Christ. You had plenty of ideas:

Trust. Risk. Sacrifice. Faith Nurture. Repair. Integrity. Community. Courage. Hope.
Honor. Love. Loyalty. Peace. Tolerance. Compassion and Forgiveness.

Those are all nouns. But now, we have verbs to go along with those nouns: We can pray, we can witness, we can unmask, we can hear, and we can work.

As we celebrate today the Baptism of our Lord and find our own rebirth in it, may we find boldness in God's claim on us in our baptism and receive anew the Holy Spirit to achieve this holy work as the body of Christ. Amen.