

Baptized Into Mystery, Memory and Mission
Baptism of the Lord Sunday - January 9, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

In the week after Christmas, when things slowed down here at the church for a moment, I found a chance to clean out and organize my file drawer, one small stab at preparing for the new year. I came across an old, dog-eared file marked "Three-year Plan." The file dates from the early 1990s and has been passed from pastor to pastor to pastor. It held several drafts of a strategic plan to save Caldwell.

Reading through it was a combination of a history lesson, an opportunity for theological reflection and an exercise in humility. A little context is important. By 1994, as many of us know, this church was shrinking fast. It numbered 185 members from a high of about 1,100 members in the 1950s. (It would, of course, dwindle even further in the years to come to a few stalwart souls, but that is to get ahead of my story.) In 1994 more than half of those 185 members were over the age of 65. The documents in the file showed how its leaders at the time saw the future of the church. It was not hopeful.

A few excerpts from the file might give you a sense of the pain and the poignancy of those times here:

"Caldwell's member families help build modern Charlotte and the church grew to be one of the largest and most dynamic congregations in the city The church has always taken seriously its obligation to serve the community, which has included support for beginning new churches, sponsorship of chapels that led to the establishment of formal churches, Friendship Trays, driving for the blind, the Uptown Shelter, Shepherd's Center, Alexander Children's Center, hunger offerings and foreign missions."

"However ... if the trends of the immediate past continue, the human and financial resources necessary to sustain the church and its work in the community will be used up."

With that introduction, the document included a detailed plan for the turnaround of the church and estimates of how much money was needed to fund it. One session memorandum about the plan closed with this:

“There is no guarantee that a strategy such as the foregoing will work, but if after our efforts and liquid assets have been exhausted, the bulldozers come in ... and the cornerstone is opened ... we need not hang our heads, but we can say, ‘We tried! We did our best.’ “

I told you the file was both painful and poignant. But for me it was also inspirational, especially as we enter a new year of possibilities in the providence of our God.

We continue to live out what the Observer dubbed “the miracle on 5th Street” that came years after the desperate efforts of those who were here before us. This month opens the fifth year since the session of the “new” Caldwell was reorganized and the work of the church began, again, in the hands of its old and new elders and members. Back then, we spoke often of the “new thing” God was doing here, and we heard that phrase again in today’s reading from the prophet Isaiah:

“See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.” (42:9)

Later this month, we will hold the Annual Congregational Meeting to adopt the 2011 budget and we will install the new elders and the session will get to work. All of this is in proper and decent order. But, as we know, being the church, the Body of Christ, is about more than just good polity and orderly process. More important, it also requires complete and selfless submission to the Holy Spirit and the will of our creator, redeemer and sustainer.

On that note in particular, I found one line in that old strategic planning file that deserves to be held up. By its very nature, the file was full of strategic planning lingo such as the need for “missions, goals, objectives, strategies, tasks and measures.”

But buried in all of that recognizable, very human and utterly predictable jargon was one line that was not so predictable, one statement that we might hold up for our own thinking as we enter 2011. One letter read:

“Caldwell is prepared to lay on the line all it has, its available cash assets, its fine large physical plant, and its small but loyal congregation.”

Do you hear what I hear in that statement? In that one claim, we hear what is required by the gospel.

“Caldwell is prepared to lay on the line all it has, its available cash assets, its fine large physical plant, and its small but loyal congregation.”

Once again: “Caldwell is prepared to lay on the line all it has”

* * *

Today, the church observes what’s known as Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

Earlier, we heard Matthew’s account of Jesus’ own baptism in the Jordan River. The Jewish people had always considered cleanliness next to Godliness, if you will. The Hebrew Bible commanded ritual washing to ensure purity in observing the Law. Those rituals were still being practiced when Jesus encountered John the Baptist around the age of 30. Gentiles who converted to Judaism were required to wash away their old ways in Baptism. But John the Baptist took it a step further, demanding that Jewish people also undergo the same rite as a baptism of repentance.

That was the context for today’s story from Matthew. When Jesus presented himself for baptism, John was understandably confused. He had already recognized Jesus as the messiah. No need for repentance on Jesus’ part, John must have been thinking. Instead, John told Jesus that Jesus should baptize him, rather than the other way around.

Why then did Jesus insist on being baptized? That’s the real question behind this text, and it can be answered on a number of levels.

Culturally, Jesus must have understood the need for a public baptism before he began his ministry. If nothing else, it was good preparation for what lay ahead. At the very least, he would have known the historic meaning of water to the long line of God’s people. In their escape from Egypt, Moses and the children of Israel entered the parted Red Sea as one thing and exited as another, a liberated and transformed nation. The same was true years later in the days of Joshua, when the waters of the Jordan stood in a heap as Israel and the Ark of the Covenant passed through into the promised land.

All of that was context for Jesus’ baptism that day but it doesn’t fully answer the question of what Jesus had in mind when he stepped off the shore of the Jordan. As Emanuel, God with us, Jesus was without sin. So Christ’s baptism was not to cleanse the one who was, after all, clean to the bone.

What it was, however, was an act of a higher kind of righteousness, a righteousness that went beyond the example of even most pure priest or Pharisee of the time. In submitting himself for baptism, Jesus showed his solidarity with all humanity. When he exited the Jordan River that day and stood on the shore, he stood with all those to whom and for whom he had come. To rescue humanity, as one commentator wrote, “it was necessary for Jesus to experience the fullness of what it meant to be human.”¹

On that day, Christ claimed his identity as the one who would humble himself in everything, finding company thereafter with the lowly, the outcast and the sinner, assuring them of the good news, and, finally, experiencing the ultimate humility of the cross.

In other words, the words from that old Caldwell session memorandum, on that day Jesus laid it all on the line.

* * *

The gospel of Matthew describes what happens next this way:

“... and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. 3:16-17)

As Henri Nouwen writes in his wonderful book, Life of the Beloved, those same words are extended to all who have joined their life to Christ’s in baptism. Nouwen writes:

Yes, there is that voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly: “You are my beloved, on you my favor rests.” It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: “You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody unless you can demonstrate the opposite But the voice that says you are my beloved has always been there.”²

Because that voice has always been there, we keep the baptism font full and front and center here in the sanctuary, next to the communion table. No matter how often we actually baptize someone, it stands as a sign and a symbol of our union with Christ in our baptism.

¹ Steven Driver, p. 240, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4

² P. 31

And with Christ we have been baptized into different life. We have been made new and invited into the same life that Christ began that day on the banks of the Jordan.

It was, first, a life of mystery. Jesus did not know what lay ahead, nor do we. But he was above all, obedient, seeking to discern and follow God's will above all else.

It was, second, a life rooted in memory, the memory of how, above all, God has walked faithfully with God's people: with Moses out of Egypt and bondage and through the Red Sea; with Joshua, and across the parted waters of the Jordan into the promised land; and, so many times before when God made good on that divine promise, "I will be your God and you will be my people."

Third, Jesus and you and I have been baptized into a life of mission, in which Christ served God with everything he had to give, even his life.

Those three things – mystery, memory and mission – are what mark the alternative imagination of those seeking to be a missional church, as we are here.³

Our baptism into mystery calls us to humble ourselves and to listen for God's will, a will that quite often cannot be deduced and reduced into objectives, goals, tasks and measures. For example, at the beginning of 2010, we did not set an objective of opening a shelter for homeless women. But it happened, thanks be to God's vision, which always exceeds ours.

Our baptism is also one that calls us to dwell in memory rather than always answering the siren call of the new and the next. Here at Caldwell, I hope we never lose the memory of how God worked through the most unlikely mix of people to resurrect this church. That memory should be formative for all of us, here in year five of this "new thing" and, if we are obedient, year 25 and 55 and 85.

Finally, we are, individually and collectively, baptized into mission. This life and orientation to mission is not one of self-actualization or of bending scripture into a self-help book. No, this baptism into mission is a journey where we find our life by losing it and where we discover God by leaving our place of security and venturing forth in faith.

Friends, we can't know what God has in store for us in 2011. But we can respond faithfully to God in Christ by giving new credence to that statement from the old file that has been passed from pastor to pastor to pastor:

³³ A theme from [Introducing the Missional Church](#), by Alan Roxborough and M. Scott Boren

“Caldwell is prepared to lay on the line all it has, its available cash assets, its fine large physical plant, and its small but loyal congregation.”

May God show us all how to live into that pledge this year and every year.

Amen.