

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 3:15–22

Sermon: “Waters of Baptism”

Our focus on this First Sunday after the Epiphany is the Baptism of Our Lord. As this takes place in the Epiphany season, there is emphasis on the revelation of who Christ is and what he is sent to accomplish, as seen through the lens of Jesus’ Baptism and what it reveals about our own Baptism.

Hard to give a clearer epiphany of Jesus’ identity than the heavenly Father provides: ***“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”*** (Luke 3:22).

Then the Collect takes that revelation and applies it to us in our Baptism:

“Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit.

Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life.” Jesus’ Baptism is about him identifying with us so that in our Baptism we are identified with him.

Our Old Testament ancestors wondered in the desert for what seemed to them anyway an eternity.

They wondered and wondered and it seem that they weren't getting anywhere, making any headway on getting to the Promised land. Of course we know why but sometimes we can relate.

The fifth-century BC mathematician and philosopher Zeno of Elea was known for his paradoxical thought experiments which questioned human assumptions of physical reality.

To paraphrase one such experiment: Zeno proposes that we imagine the common experience of walking across a typical street. Further imagine that, in doing so, after our first step, we are required to limit each further step to one half of the distance of the previous step. In this way, let us imagine that our first step gets us two feet closer to the other side, the second step moves us forward, but only one foot closer, and the subsequent step another six inches closer to our goal.

The paradox occurs as we realize that the distance of our previous steps can be halved infinitely in ever more miniscule movements. In other words, Zeno is observing the possibility of constant, forward motion that never arrives at a destination.

Zeno's paradox has us always moving, seemingly making progress, but never getting anywhere.

Have you ever felt this way in life and maybe as you think ahead to eternity? Do you ever wonder if you'll ever get where you want or need to go? Wouldn't you like to know if there is a solution to the paradox of progress, rather than the destination eluding us eternally? We need the water of Baptism that gives us our identity in Christ and all it gives.

In our Gospel this morning, beginning with Luke 3:15, our eyes are directed to the crowds on the banks of the Jordan River, described as "**people in expectation,**" a people waiting for something to happen. These expectant Israelites would likely appreciate the frustration found in Zeno's thought experiment, as they, too, were people who, for generations, moved a lot (both figuratively and literally) but never seemed to get where they truly desired to be.

The crowds on Jordan's banks, these people in expectation, were also people in a predicament. They felt held back by the oppression of Caesar and the Roman Empire.

They felt held back by the abuses of their own local government, Herod the tetrarch after Herod the Great. These local kings, instead of being beneficial advocates, were murderous tyrants, using their subjects to further their own selfish interests. And as if Roman rule and its puppets weren't bad enough, John tells these weary people that their own national heritage, their earthly descendancy from the mighty Abraham, would also get them nowhere. Heaven certainly appeared closed on this day.

This was a frustrating predicament that had existed for thousands of years. It began when the first humans trusted that human knowledge, rather than trust in their Creator, would get them where they wanted to be. They quickly learned that having one's "eyes opened" apart from God was not the epiphany they expected but rather quite deadly.

From the dependence on human knowledge came the belief that we could move forward if we just had enough rules and regulations to get us there. Humanity got plenty of both, but quickly realized they could not follow them, even when engraved in stone by God himself.

Then later, it was thought that having a strong human leader, a wise, beneficent king, would certainly get people where they wanted to go. But again, failure.

This was truly a distressing predicament. Knowledge had failed them. Rules had failed them. Government had failed them. These people had a history of movement and change that had gotten them nothing except captivity. The destination of heaven was closed, a predicament not just theirs but one also shared by the entire human race.

Especially in our own troubled days, we identify with the predicament and weary frustration of the Israelite people on the shores of the Jordan River. We have seen, firsthand, the failure of human knowledge, human rules, and human government to bring us to the destination we seek. We, too, are people in a predicament, endlessly moving, but never getting anywhere.

This predicament has existed since the time of the fall, but the deeper and ongoing problem is our powerlessness to do anything about it. And worse, we stubbornly refuse to admit we have a problem, to realize that we are powerless to reach the destination. After all, we're moving forward, right?

Making progress, right? Just a little more and we'll be there, right?

In verse 15 of our text, the crowds turn their eyes to John the Baptizer, thinking that this amazing man might be their solution, sinful human though he was. John, however, in verse 16, quickly dispels this notion by recognizing his own powerlessness, his unworthiness even to untie the simple strap of the sandals of the real Savior.

Herein lies the problem that keeps us in our predicament: our failure to accept our powerlessness. In Zeno's thought experiment, we find endless motion without a destination because we are trying to cross the finite distance to the other side of the street with the infinite divisibility of the steps. The problem reminds us of the expectant Israelites on the banks of the Jordan and of fallen humanity throughout the ages. Except that here the finite has no means of accessing, achieving, or even comprehending an infinite that, instead of dividing, multiplies the distance between us and the destination.

In John's Gospel, our Lord explains, ***"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"*** (John 3:6).

A broken, sinful human being is powerless to create anything from within itself that is not already there. That's our problem. In other words, the dinner you make is limited by the ingredients you have. If we expect a greater-than-human solution from the ingredients of human knowledge, human rules, human politics, human ability, we will always be disappointed, always moving but never getting anywhere.

But do not despair. Everything changes in verse 21 of our text: **“When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened.”**

The heavens are opened! The destination is in sight! Everything that broken humanity has longed for since the expulsion from Eden has been made accessible. For the first time since the fall and for all time evermore, the destination is reachable.

The Son of God, fully human, yet fully divine, in future time and timelessly crucified and risen from the dead, enters the waters of Baptism. In this man, the finite and the infinite are miraculously and incomprehensibly made into one. ***“And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’”*** (v 22).

Jesus Christ is now revealed, by the Father's own voice, to be the only perfect, infinite human worthy of the perfect, infinite destination, because he is the Creator of that destination. Heaven is open to Christ because it belongs to him.

Jesus' Baptism provides the same progress for us. How? How does Jesus' Baptism end our predicament? It does so because the Son of God, as the Word, in a miraculous way, remains in the water of Baptism. He enters the water for all time so that he might meet us in our Baptism.

In the water of our Baptism, our failed humanity is killed with Christ upon the cross. In that same water, Christ provides the life-giving Holy Spirit, who creates the faith which receives infinite life. ***“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life”*** (Romans 6:3–4).

In the water of our Baptism, the infinite Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has, from outside our reality, reached in and miraculously joined us to himself. ***“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”*** (Galatians 3:27).

Rejoice! We have received what we could not ourselves achieve, for in our Baptism, the power of God’s Son, his Word, has brought the destination down to us, granting us the assurance of heaven, even as we admit our powerlessness.

Jesus’ Baptism—and our Baptism—is the Provider of true Progress. Yes, we confess that we are powerless to solve the problems that lead to our predicament, but in the water of our Baptism, we, the powerless, have been joined to our crucified and risen Creator, not briefly, but forever. Contrary to all earthly appearances, despite our endless failures, we rejoice in this tangible assurance that our predicament has ended, our problem has been solved, and the means to arrive at our heavenly destination, long hoped for, true progress, has been provided.

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isaiah 43:1–3).

In the name of Christ.

Amen.