

Your Divine Assignment (Luke 3:15-17,21-22)

Every year at this time in the cycle of readings from the New Testament, we hear about Jesus' baptism. We hear that John the Baptist was a forerunner to Jesus, and that John's baptism was a baptism giving people a second chance in their lives through repentance for sins. We hear, on the other hand, that something greater still is coming – another kind of baptism, a Holy Spirit baptism that has the qualities of both fire and water. Like water, this new baptism will wash off the old. Like fire, it will forge a new relationship between God and God's people. Finally in this reading, we get a glimpse of what this new baptism will look like. Although it is John who baptizes Jesus, it is God who speaks, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

This morning I would like to open up our idea about what baptism is for. In the churches of the United Church of Christ, baptism is one of two practices we call **sacraments**. Sacraments are holy practices, ones which we believe are suffused with the Spirit of Jesus. Sacraments offer us a direct experience of the life and story we hear about in the texts of the bible. One sacrament, called **communion** or **The Lords Supper**, puts us in the seat of Jesus' disciples at a meal, reminding us of the incredible power of God's saving love even in the face of everything we fear. **Baptism** brings us back to that moment when Jesus arrives on the scene – not as a child in a manger, but as an adult with a purpose. **Baptism** reminds us that we also have a purpose, a divine assignment, the assignment given to Jesus and handed down to us through His Spirit, the restoration of our original relationship with a just and loving God.

Because in our tradition in the United Church of Christ, we tend to baptize children, most of us do not remember our own baptism. Am I right? How many people here this morning remember your own baptism? Those of you brought up in Baptist churches will probably remember your baptism because Baptist churches practice what is called ***Believers' Baptism***, a baptism that can only happen when you are old enough to say what you believe for yourself. We in the Congregational tradition have a sense that baptism is a two-step process. Our families bring us into the church at baptism and lay the faith and purpose of the church upon us before we have any idea what's being inflicted on us. Later, at confirmation, we have an opportunity to review what was done to us and see if "the shoe still fits" and we still wish to do the journey and call ourselves followers of Jesus.

All of us, however, are called upon from time to time in church to reaffirm our baptism. We do it when children are baptized here in the church and we do it when we welcome new members. We say: "I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit." These statements tie us back to the experience of believer's over two thousand years, believers stating unequivocally they before they belong to family or community or party or state or nation, they belong to God and they belong to a household of other persons with the same commitment. We are, therefore, as Christians a motley crew, wildly different from one another on the outside, but gathered together by a Spirit that says to us on the inside what was said to Jesus: ***You are my Beloved son or daughter. With you I am well pleased.***

So what is our assignment in baptism? Our assignment is *to be the beloved community of a just and loving God in a weird and wacky world*. We are to know that we are beloved. We are to know that we are forgiven. And we are to see that the salvation of the world runs right through the very relationship with have

with our God. Not that we personally are saviors, but that the relationship we have with God is what saves and it runs right through us. Therefore we live in certain ways that speak of the God whom we know. We insert into the world a testimony that says *this weird and wacky world is not all there is. We know a just and loving God – and so can you!*

Some times at baptism, when as the pastor it is time for me to give out a baptismal certificate, I want to snatch it back. I'm afraid, you see, that some day the baptized person will whip that certificate out and say, *See, I belong. I'm a Christian!* If you need a piece of paper to prove you're a Christian, you see, then you and I, and the world, and Jesus are in sorry shape. There's nothing wrong with a certificate that says you've been baptized. But there's no salvation in a piece of paper. If your baptism is not visible in you – if some body isn't getting the idea from how you behave that you are on a divine assignment – then a piece of paper isn't going to convince anybody that they might want to be a Christian, too.

Here's the thing. I don't think we are aware enough how important our divine assignment is. We live in a certifiably weird and wacky world in which the most amazing things are claimed to be from God. We saw and heard over Christmas the news about a young Nigerian man who stuffed his underwear with explosives and tried to blow up a Northwest airlines flight into Detroit – all in the name of God. Thank God he failed! But what do you do with that thought? Who would ever dream that God would send a kid with explosives in his pants to blow innocent people up?

And lest we assume that only Islam has its radical looney-tunes, did you hear the news recently that Senator Jim Imhofe, a conservative Christian and US Senator

from Oklahoma, last year travelled to the African nation of Uganda to help that nation craft legislation against homosexuality, legislation which in its draft form called for the death penalty for Gay people? Although in its present form the Ugandan legislation calls instead for life imprisonment for Gay people, Senator Imhofe has described his trip as working to “put the world on a Jesus footing.”

Of course we want to ask, *what are they thinking?* But instead this morning I want to ask us: *what are we thinking when we overlook the true nature of our baptism and treat it like a piece of paper?*

We have a divine assignment in this weird and wacky world. Do you remember the old TV show, “Mission Impossible”? Do you remember the first words of every show: “Good morning. Your mission, should you choose to accept it.” *That’s our baptism!* Can you hear the urgency in God’s voice? Can you hear God crying out to us, *Your mission today, should you choose to accept it, is to reclaim my name from all who would misuse it out of anger or fear!*

We are not alone in our assignment. That is what we affirm when we say, “I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit.” We mean we know a loving God, a forgiving God, a God just to all God’s children, a powerful God calling his people back to him. So -- we have an assignment – to show what we know! *Be the beloved community! Show how the weird and wacky world is not how it has to be! Show love! Show forgiveness! Show justice! Show God! Who will reclaim God’s name if those who bear God’s name will not?*

I am sometimes asked why we call ourselves “A Jesus-centered, Open and Affirming, Multi-racial Community.” It’s not because we get it right all the time or

because we are anything special. We're just a people on assignment to do something beautiful but awfully difficult: *to reclaim for people a relationship with a just and loving God*. Those who come to know that God here, those who are willing to keep on the journey even when it gets hard, believe that the salvation of the world runs straight through places like this and people like us.

I'd like to close by trying something out with you. The words of our baptismal affirmation are powerful, but I don't know that we really own them. We read them off a piece of paper. We say them. But I don't know that we hear them as *our divine assignment*. I don't know that we say them to ourselves when the going gets rough. I don't know that we sing them when the going is joyous. So instead of saying, *I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit* – on the occasion of our remembering Jesus' baptism when he was sent into the world on his divine assignment – I would like to affirm our baptism vows today with words we can say or sing at any point in our lives.

If you wish, if your heart is willing, if you hope and believe that God has a divine assignment for you that will be revealed to you as you grow and have your being in this beloved community, if you want to know what your baptism is for, would you repeat these simple words after me?

I am beloved.

I am forgiven.

I am sent.

Did you hear yourself? *I am beloved. I am forgiven. I am sent.* Now go live them. It's what your baptism is for.

Amen

O God,

Holy is your name, holy and amazing is your presence among us,

Holy is your word; holy and transforming is your love; holy and awesome is your call to be your beloved community.

Help us to be the persons you know us to be; help us to build the church you imagine us to be; help us to see ourselves as you see us: beloved, forgiven and sent.

In a weird and wacky world based solely on anger and fear, help us to use your name solely for your purposes, for love and for justice for all your children.

O Divine Redeemer, speak gently in our hearts whenever we hold grievances. Rest your peace upon us when we are afraid. Never let us imagine that we are separated from you; never allow us to confuse our judgments with your truth. Call us back again and again to our baptism when we realized that you have claimed us for your own.

May our baptism make us transparent so that all who seek you may find you in our words and deeds. Without you we are a vain show. With you we are people in whom the world may find its peace and its restoration.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your son, the beloved, in whom we have found who you are, and therefore, who we are.

Amen