

There is a rhythm we anticipate, first came All Saint's Day, then Thanksgiving, the 4 weeks of Advent, culminating on Christmas, followed on 12<sup>th</sup> Night (January 6<sup>th</sup>) with Epiphany and reading of the Kings with their gifts for the baby Jesus of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. Except that since the 1980s, churches around the world have followed a 3 year rotation of Bible readings, and this year on the Sunday after Christmas we read John 1 describing that The Word was With God from the very Beginning. Today is the Sunday following January 6<sup>th</sup>, no matter which year we are in, Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

There is always controversy about Jesus' Baptism because in several of the Gospels there is description of John providing a "Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sin" and if the Son of God was without sin, why was he baptized? Actually Christianity was not the first religion to offer Baptism, in a culture before Public Health where soap and water were not used regularly, Judaism offered whole body Baptism by Immersion for a washing away of our old identity when we were Bar Mitzvah, when we Married, when forgiven a sin, cleansed of an impurity, or began candidating for Political office.

SO CHRISTIAN BAPTISM, PARTICULARLY THE BAPTISM OF JESUS HAD TO BE DIFFERENT. John said it would be different because Jesus' Baptism would be "of the Holy Spirit and of Fire"... I struggle with whether those are still helpful descriptions for us, because I think what we are actually Baptized with in Jesus Christ is IDENTITY & LOVE. We are each given a Name and Commitment, no matter what, that you belong, you are loved.

In Green Valley Baptism is a rare occurrence. Years ago, I baptized at least a dozen, some years over 20. But one baptism sticks out especially. My tradition has been to carry the baptized child around the Sanctuary so they could see and be seen by the entire worshipping congregation. On this day, a son of the congregation, whom over the years I had also Baptized and Confirmed and witnessed his Graduation, was shipping out for duty with Special Forces. He came to worship wearing his uniform, his mother cried. As I walked through the congregation, I asked the soldier to stand up and placed the baby in his arms for him to carry. I described that "before you carry an M16 Rifle into battle, you needed to carry a baby in your arms. I then named that we would be praying for this child all of his life, because he was known by this body of Christ, he was loved." When he returned 2 years later he described having retold that story among his squad several times.

I had begun considering the effects upon Valley Presbyterian of our not having Life Celebrated monthly when we had our LONGEST NIGHT, and with that, each person came forward to light a candle and name before the Church, before God: names of loved ones. Even after death, you are LOVED & Remembered.

After Christmas, I took our son to the Airport and after he went through the TSA Check-in someone in a rush tried to skip the agent pushing bags onto the conveyor. The TSA Agent called out in a commanding voice STOP, and although it was Christmas, the whole Terminal Froze in place. It was really no big deal. Except afterward it occurred to me, with all of the Security Alerts and Terrorism, our old world of safety and security is gone forever, and we constantly feel anxious and afraid. For over 20 years we have been on heightened alert. For these last 22 months, we have lived with fear of COVID; and in faith, especially when considering losses, when human life has endured a different way of being for two years we give up hoping for change, we acclimate that they are not coming back, things are different, and we are afraid.

Israel had witnessed year after year of attacks, tearing down their defenses, until the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and they were carried off to Babylon; then Babylon was invaded, destroyed by Persians. Suddenly, beginning in Chapter 40 there is something fresh with "Comfort, comfort my people says your God". Isaiah 43 proclaims "Fear Not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

Fear Not is what the Angels said to the Shepherds. On Easter morning when the angel appeared to the first witnesses, the angel said "Fear Not". And when the resurrected Jesus commissioned the apostles to go into the world to Baptize others, his command to them was "Fear not, I am with you always." Fear Not you are loved, I have called you by name, you are mine!

I knew a man, who had long been the lay leader of a congregation. He was good and kind and helpful. But privately he described that he had not always been. As a teenager he had been afraid so acted as a hellion. "But then", he said "I met someone. She was kind and sweet and moral, and she loved me no matter how much of a scoundrel I tried to be. And because I wanted to live up to her love, I was less afraid and became less and less a stinker. All of our lives, I have tried to live as she made me. Then he put his whole life-story into one statement: "The truth is, she loved me into being."

Jesus' baptism according to Luke is different, not only different from the Water Baptism of John the Baptist, but different in each of the Gospels where this story is told. In the verses of Luke, immediately after description by John of one who is to come mightier than John // and immediately before Jesus' Baptism, is description that John was arrested by Herod who put John into prison. So Jesus' Baptism was not by John or any human being holding him... As much of an historian as Luke has been naming who was Emperor and Tetrach and Priest, Luke's emphasis in Jesus' Baptism is not WHO did the Baptizing, the emphasis is upon WHAT IT MEANS for Jesus, what it means for humanity, what it means for all the world that the Heavens parted and a Voice came from Heaven: "Fear Not, Thou art my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased!"

The great Reformer Martin Luther is described as having spent most of his life plagued by doubts, despair, feelings of unworthiness. Luther had inscribed over the desk in his office "Remember, you have been baptized". Often Martin Luther would touch his own forehead and remind himself "Martin, you are baptized" Loved by God, Fear Not.

Fred Craddock was one of the great preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Craddock tells the story of one evening in the Smokey Mountains, when a he and his wife were at a restaurant. A strange man kept staring at them, then got up and came over to their table. Out of the blue, he described "I know everyone from around these parts, you are not from here, but I am. My mother was not married, and all the shame of the whole community that was directed at her, came down to me. Whenever we came to town, I could hear people talk and feel their stares, trying to make guesses of who my Daddy was. At school I ate my lunch alone. In my teens I began attending the little church, but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could sneak out, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the pastor. He looked closely at my face, stared into my eyes. I knew that he too knew my mother's story and was trying to guess who my father might be. "Well boy" said the preacher "It is written all over your face. You are the child of..." then he paused and touched his lips... "You are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance!" Then he swatted me on the bottom and said "Now, go on and claim your inheritance!" I left church that day a different person, in fact that was the beginning of a life unafraid." What is your name asked Dr. Craddock? The man answered "Ben Hooper". Later, Craddock came to learn that the people of Tennessee had twice elected a man named Ben Hooper to serve as their State's Governor.

Finally, I would like to add a story told about a man who regularly volunteers with Habitat for Humanity building houses, some years 5 or 6, but he described that he made God a promise to always build at least two. He has honored that promise for over 30 years. He tells the story that he had returned from

Vietnam, struggling to adjust. He had no family, so drifted from town to town and job to job. Finally, he signed on to help as a carpenter building six moderately sized and affordably priced houses. He told the Foreman, he would be happy not only to be a carpenter but to also provide security, if he could pitch his sleeping bag on the construction site. The owner of the construction business was so impressed by the man's abilities, his integrity and commitment, that at the close of the project, almost a year in the making, he took the younger man aside and said "I want to thank you, for what you have done, and I want you to stay with the company." He then handed the worker a set of keys, saying "The 6th house we built, has your name on it. Take it." "But I cannot afford a house!" the carpenter protested. To which the employer answered "You will find a way." "My volunteer work is how I have repaid him, at least twice a year, every year, I put a roof over someone else's head, just as was put over my own."

Forgiveness is involved in Baptism, but more AS A RESULT OF God's love THAN AS A CONDITION.  
Baptism is a relationship of being loved, named, claimed as a child of God. YOU ARE LOVED, FEAR NOT!