

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The word of the Lord.

Sermon 1/10/10 Susi Kawolics

Today's scripture reading invites us to reflect not only on Jesus' baptism, but on our own as well. Tradition has it that whenever Martin Luther felt his energy flagging, his doubt growing, or his fear strengthening, he would cry out, "I am baptized!" This was his exhortation to people who needed encouragement - "Remember your baptism!"

Do you remember your baptism? I would guess most of you do not. If you're like me, you were too young, or it was too long ago. But our baptism, whether we actually remember it or not, is meant to be a life-changing experience. It is a ritual which acknowledges God's unconditional love and acceptance of us, calls us to repentance and provides us with all we need to be a follower of Christ.

In today's gospel, the voice of God comes to Jesus in the form of a dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit. It says, "You are my beloved - with you I am well pleased." It is the voice that assures Jesus of God's unconditional love and acceptance of him. Its voice speaks to us in the same way. One of the truths about our own baptism is that we also are unconditionally loved and accepted by God. And as God loves us as children, we are called to imitate that love for our own children. For one of my dear friends, Mary Kay Kusner, this kind a love and acceptance was at the heart of the ritual of her daughter's baptism.

Mary Kay is a chaplain and an author, and has just written a book entitled "Upside Down and Backwards," which is the story of her relationship with her fourth child, Anna. Anna is a special needs child who has brought both joy and struggle into the life of her family. Before Anna was even a thought, Mary Kay and her husband Dave were raising their three sons. Then Dave was diagnosed with Hodgkins disease. After he went through chemo and was told he was cured, Mary Kay felt a call to have another child. Being a spiritual person, she prayed about this, talked with trusted mentors, and listened for the voice of the spirit within. She came to the belief that this was indeed a call from God, that a fourth child would complete her family and come to announce her husband's healing.

When Anna was born, it was immediately clear that although the amniocentesis and other tests predicted that the baby was fine and perfectly normal, the tests had been wrong. Anna was born with a chromosomal abnormality. Mary Kay struggled with the challenge to accept that truth about her daughter. After a multitude of tests, medical procedures and consultations, the prospects for Anna's future looked grim. However, in defiance of the words of the neurosurgeon, who dismissed Anna as someone who would not make much progress and for whom therapies would be a waste of time, the whole Kusner family decided they would support Anna and work with her so

she could achieve her full potential. Her baptism when she was four months old became a way to symbolize Anna's formal welcome into the world. It was the family's first public presentation of her to the community. Mary Kay wondered how people would react. Anna had a very misshapen forehead, she had dystonia, which meant that her muscles were very weak and this made her very floppy. For the family, this baptism would be a ritual of love, an outward sign of their deep acceptance of this special child. Mary Kay's hope for the ritual was to wash away all her fears and worries and help her completely surrender to Anna's future, whatever it might be.

My friend's understanding of Baptism makes real for me the acceptance aspect of the ritual. Mary Kay understood that Anna was loved and accepted by God just as she was. She prayed for the heart to be able to feel the same way about her daughter. We also are unconditionally loved and accepted. Once we believe this about ourselves, we are called to believe it about our children, and about all other children of God as well.

Reverend Kate Matthews Huey puts it this way: We belong to God, and God loves us. It's as if God is trying to say to each one of us, "No matter what happens and no matter how low and discouraged you feel, no matter what is happening around you and in your life, don't you ever let anyone tell you that you are anything but a precious and beloved child of God."

This is our starting point. But - it is not the end. The love and acceptance God has for us compels us to deepen our relationship with God, and to live the life God is calling us to. In today's passage, we hear how John was calling people to repentance. For a long time, one of the major understandings of baptism has been the renouncement of one's old way of life, and commitment to a new way. Baptism, then, ritually washes away the sin of the old life. The symbolism of water for cleansing is evident in this understanding. In the beginning of Christianity, the process of preparing for baptism took three years of learning how to live in the community and the way of Jesus. When those early Christians were baptized, they were immersed into the waters to symbolically put to death their old life and rise to a new life. These baptismal waters were dangerous, as many early believers were literally risking death by declaring their commitment to follow Christ.

Today, this understanding of baptism may not resonate with us. In mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, we probably baptize more babies than we do adults. These infants and children are not making their own decisions to turn away from an old way of life in the sacrament of Baptism, and we cannot imagine that they would need to be cleansed of their sins.

The document written by the World Council of Churches about Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry clarifies this a bit when it says: The practice of infant baptism emphasizes the corporate faith and the faith which the child shares with its parents. The infant is born into a broken world and shares in its brokenness. Through baptism, the promise and claim of the Gospel are laid upon the child.

Baptism, then, more than a washing away of individual sin, acknowledges that we are all part of a broken world, and that we are called to participate in its healing. Our baptism awakens within us a sense of what is God's way, of what is God's call. As God's children, we are called to live a new way of life, a life informed by God's love and grace, a life guided by God's word.

Writer and Theologian Sarah Dylan Breuer says "If some part of you believes that the world as it is on the front page of the newspaper is not the world as it was meant to be, you're not crazy and you're not just a starry-eyed idealist; you are feeling God's call in Baptism. If some part of you wants something more than the chance to achieve

enough to feel pressured to achieve more . . . you're not just greedy or lazy or odd; you're feeling God's call in Baptism."

There are places in your life where you may feel called to change your path, to move beyond what you're doing, to work for building the realm of God. When you answer this call, this is repentance, this is affirmation of your Baptism.

The call to a new way of living may seem daunting, even overwhelming. But the third component of baptism is the coming of the spirit, the fire in our hearts, the equipping for new life. Once we commit to following Christ, the spirit equips us with wisdom guidance and strength.

We are given the gift of the spirit at our baptism. When we open our hearts and minds to the voice of God in our own quiet prayer times, we hear God's wisdom, and receive the gifts we need carry out the work that God calls us to do. God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us, to inspire us, to strengthen us and to equip us in our faith.

Another place we are equipped and supported on the journey is through our church community, and through the whole Christian community, which we become part of through our baptism. The church teaches us, supports us, comforts and encourages us as we live out our baptismal call. We gather together in church as the body of Christ so that as we leave, we become the body of Christ to our hurting world.

We gather to remember our Baptism. We remember that God accepts us as we are, loving us unconditionally. As we respond to that love and strive to live out our baptismal call, we are promised the gifts and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The reading from Isaiah reminds us that the one who created us is our most intimate companion. God calls us by name and abides with us in every life situation. God is here with us, and we will make it through life's trials, no matter what they are. May you remember your baptism as the call and the promise of new life, and as God's faithful and abiding presence now and forever. Amen.