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“Decisive Turning Point”

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Baptism of the Lord (Year C)

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Isaiah 42:1–4, 6–7; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34–38; Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

The birth of Jesus caused enough of a stir in Bethlehem to capture the attention of some local shepherds. Later, three wise men from the East caused a little wonderment with their arrival bringing gifts to the newborn king. In the time that Jesus remained behind for three days in the temple teaching and discussing theology and the Torah with the rabbi, that reality caused consternation with his family, but really didn't arouse a great deal of concern in his community. Until...

... Until the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he was the Messiah. This Jesus, who grew up in Nazareth, his youth, his young manhood—where the reality of his days in Nazareth as the son of a carpenter were unassuming, ordinary, and quiet, until...

“And then Jesus, with all the people, was baptized” (Luke 3:21). Jesus was baptized and he came out of the river Jordan praying, and the heavens were opened. I can't imagine exactly what happened in that event of Jesus' baptism, but two truths have emerged that have direct impact and significance for our own baptisms. First is: God loved him unconditionally, profoundly, deeply. “You are my son, beloved. With you, I am deeply and well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Immediately before the voice, he experienced the descent upon him of God's spirit. It was a powerful moment for him. It was a decisive turning point. When he emerged from the water, he had a new self-awareness, a new sense of direction, a new sense of purpose, a new mission that he knew was God's mission for him. It's very different

than the stories of his infancy and of his youth. He was now touched by God in ways that transformed his life in an extraordinary moment of his baptism.

And what was that mission like? The church understands that those suffering servant songs from Isaiah were the way in which Jesus understood himself throughout his ministry. He was God's chosen one in whom God's soul delights. He was called upon for this new sense of mission to bring forth justice to the nations, to bring forth justice to the earth and to the coastlands; he was to be a covenant for all the people, a light to the nations; he was to open the eyes of the blind, and he was to lead from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Isaiah's poetry captures the meaning and the power and the significance of the baptism of Jesus. And so too for us, this has direct meaning for us because all of us throughout all our lives understand the power of decisive moments. I know that, as a parent and educator, all of us understand the importance of self-development, self-awareness, self-esteem. We are concerned about our children developing into young adults where they have a sense of purpose and mission in their lives, and a sense of a maturity to handle all the trials and challenges that come, no matter what they may be. It is precisely how we see ourselves that determines who we are, how we think, how we act, how we feel, the choices we make, the future directions we choose, and how we relate one to the other—all of this ends up being a part of the composite profile of growing up as a human being.

It was true for Jesus, but what happened in his life that was so extraordinary is that at his baptism, he developed a strong sense of self that became the touchstone for the future of his life. Jesus did not preach a word of the coming kingdom, perform any acts of healing, or forgive anyone of their sins until after his baptism. It is a powerful moment. It is the reason why the church sets aside a specific day at the beginning of his public ministry for us to commemorate, to reaffirm the significance and the power of that moment where Jesus sees himself full of the spirit, empowered by God, and sent forth on mission.

We gather on this day with the font in front of us, in front of the table at which we will receive Holy Communion, the two sacraments of our church, and we will remember that we, too, have gone down under that water, and that we, too, came

out filled with the spirit, identified with the dying and the rising of Christ, and that we, too, are a covenant, as church, with the whole world in which we live as a Christian people. The challenge is that sometimes we forget or we don't realize the significance of the gift with all the distractions of our lives, but my hope is that at every baptism that we attend and witness, every celebration like this in which we are remembered, that we remember the baptism of the Lord, every confession of sin when we stand at the font and remind you that you are forgiven under the waters of this baptism, each and every moment we have the opportunity throughout the stages of our lives to renew and reaffirm our conviction that we are a new creation in Christ Jesus, that we have been filled with the spirit, that we have been empowered the by spirit, and that we are sent on mission to heal those who are sick, to offer reconciliation and forgiveness to those who have wronged us, to offer shelter and food for those who are without homes and without food, to eliminate gun violence in our community. All of this is tied up in being sent forth on mission to carry forth what God's kingdom is all about. Jesus didn't preach the kingdom until after he was baptized, after he wrestled with the demons. **Then he said**, "The Kingdom of God is near; repent of your sins and believe in the Good News."

I invite you in a few short moments to reaffirm your baptismal promises, and when you come forward at communion, touch the water so that the water will remind you that you were touched by that water given new life, new hope, a new sense of direction: a decisive turning point for the way in which we lead and live our Christian life.