

Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11 ***The Age of Grace***
January 11, 2015 **Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

This Sunday, as we turn our focus on a grown up Jesus at his baptism, which marks the beginning of his ministry, I guess we can say “Christmas is really over.” Which makes me a little sad but I guess we have to move on, don’t we?

But don’t be surprised if we sing a Christmas carol every now and then. We waited so long, throughout Advent to sing them, it seems we should continue a little longer.

Maybe the celebration of Christmas with decorations is over, but hopefully, the love and joy will live on all year in our hearts. That’s really what Christmas is all about – because when Jesus came to earth, the age of grace began.

And while we love the celebration of Christmas and the thought of Immanuel coming to earth as a baby, we should be especially thankful for grown up Jesus – Jesus, the man. For it was this man who taught us what it really means to love and be loved by God.

Before Jesus, people knew the law – the 10 Commandments – given to Moses. People knew that loving God was one of the 10. People knew the others too. They had to memorize those laws, along with hundreds of others that the Scribes and Pharisees and other temple leaders added on. Laws – to help keep the Law.

What people knew was that it was impossible to be as perfect as those laws mandated. They knew judgment and exclusion and guilt. Life was hard enough, but these laws were stumbling blocks that would sometimes keep them out of places of worship.

Imagine a life as a peasant – poor, uneducated, barely making a living to feed your children; your home is small; if you are a male, you might be a fisherman, trying to catch enough to sell. Yet, you are the one who is welcome into the main worship area – if you have something to sacrifice first.

But, if you are a woman or a child, you are considered second-class, or less. You do what your husband or father says to do. You don’t sit with your husband in worship. You don’t speak in the temple or synagogue. You can’t enter at all if you are considered unclean and there are many reasons why you might be considered unclean – for men and women.

If you are a Jew, you are under the rule of two different oppressors. First of all, you are under Roman authority. And second, you are under the temple leader’s authority. You pay taxes to Rome and to the temple.

If you develop a disease – like leprosy or something else incurable – you are an outcast. You can no longer live in the community. You say goodbye to your family and are forced to go live outside the city in loneliness and misery until you die.

It's not that there were never any moments of joy, or happiness, but it certainly was not a time when grace was extended very often.

However, when Jesus came into adulthood and began his ministry of teaching and healing and performing miracles, grace went everywhere with him, and to all those whom he touched.

So Jesus' Baptism is a big deal. We are told that John, known as John the Baptizer, came before Jesus. In fact we hear in the Advent Scriptures about the one who came to prepare the way for the Messiah – the anointed one of God, who would be called Jesus.

John (who was Jesus' cousin) came preaching about the need to repent of sins and to turn to God. John preached with fiery words. He was an odd, eccentric man who lived in the wilderness, but he had a following of people. His message of repentance and forgiveness was what the people needed to hear and they flocked out into the wilderness to where he was.

John baptized people in the river Jordan – a baptism of repentance for sins. And many people went to be baptized and were finding relief and joy in this baptism.

So, perhaps it seems odd to us that Jesus, who had no sin, would go to John to be baptized with all those hundreds of people who were there to repent, to metaphorically have their sins 'washed away' by the waters of the Jordan.

But, if John's baptism was about repentance then why would Jesus need to be baptized in the first place? The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was without sin.

Sometimes I imagine all those sinful people out in the river. They all repent and as they are baptized their sins just roll off of them and float out on top of the water.

We used to swim in Snow Creek, a creek that ran through our property. But sometimes it was dirty looking and there were splotches of algae and weeds and bugs – certainly not anything you would want to get on you. Maybe the River Jordan looked like that after all those sins were washed off.

And then comes Jesus, pure and sin free, putting himself into that contaminated water and all those sins splash all over him.

That's a simple, and rather silly way of looking at something so serious and complex.

The point is, Jesus, the Son of God, plunged right into humanity and associated so completely with us, he was willing, pure as he was, to get dirty with us, to mingle among sinful humanity.

Do you remember your baptism? For many of us it's hard to do. Most of us Presbyterians were baptized as infants. Our parents would remember, but our memories just don't go back that far.

Perhaps you are one who was baptized when you were older. Did you kneel at the baptismal font, the water pouring over your head? Or did you just barely feel the water as the wet fingers of the minister touched your head three times – in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Or, did you have the experience of wading into the water – a baptismal pool or perhaps a lake – and have the water rush over you as you were immersed down into it? Today, I'd like to offer you the experience of going to the lake and wading into the waters of baptism. So we can file out and march down to the lake in back of our church. Who wants to go first?

Okay, I'm kidding of course. We would have to break the ice before stepping in.

The truth is, we don't have to have another baptism. In fact, we as Presbyterians believe that all we need is one baptism, even if we have strayed a long ways from those promises made at the time of our baptism because we know that baptism isn't something we do as much as it is something God does.

We, in our humanity, do break our promises – the covenant made with God. But God never breaks his promise to us. We believe that in baptism, even though we see something happen – water splashed or poured or sprinkled over a person – what we see is not as important as what we cannot see.

What we cannot see is how we are immersed in God's grace; we are grafted into the family of God – the Body of Christ. We cannot see the Holy Spirit that fills us and empowers us and will be there to help us all the days of our lives.

We don't need a second baptism, because God does it right the first time. What we can do are special things that remind us of the promises we made, or that were made for us, and that help us remember that our baptism is about more than water. It is about receiving the Holy Spirit. It is, as we say, "an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace."

Paul said to those believers in Ephesus, "John's baptism was about repentance, preparing people to believe in Jesus." Then Paul laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

In our baptism we say we are sealed in God's grace. In the history of the DeHaven family there is a picture of a stamp – with an insignia – used on papers that were the distinguished mark of the DeHaven family.

Each time I say or hear the baptismal liturgy that says we are “sealed in God's grace,” I imagine a special stamp with God's own image on it – an insignia we are sealed with – God's image. It's invisible, but it's there – on our hearts, on our foreheads where the sign of the cross is made – it is there forever and ever.

When Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, Mark tells us that he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In our baptism we too are claimed as one of God's beloved children, sealed with the Father's own image on us.

The words to this fairly new hymn we are about to sing, written by Fred Pratt Green, in 1978, sums up really well who Jesus is, and what his mission on earth was.

“When Jesus came to Jordan to be baptized by John, He did not come for pardon, but as God's Holy One. He came to share repentance with all who mourn their sins, to speak the vital sentence with which good news begins.

He came to share temptation, our utmost woe and loss; for us and our salvation to die upon the cross. So when the dove descended on him, the Holy One, the hidden years had ended, the age of grace begun.”

We wear the mark, the seal of the one whom we belong to. Because of Jesus, we have received the Holy Spirit; we have believed the great good news.

Thanks be to God for the grown up Jesus, who took our sins upon himself; who died, that we might be forgiven and freed from sin; and whose resurrection gives the promise of life forever with him. Thanks be to God, for we are living in the age of grace.

© Copyright 2015. All Rights Reserved.