

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness!*
Let us worship God.

(Psalm 29.1-2)

HYMN: Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty, eternal, and loving God:

We have come to worship you in response to your call. We are happy that you wish to dialogue with us in worship. As we begin this dialogue with you, then, we pray that we may hear what you say to us, and that we also may be sincere in what we say to you. In this way, may our relationship with you and each other be enriched, and may we be guided and strengthened for the week that lies ahead of us.

We confess, however, that we often fail to serve you as you wish. Sometimes we do only the things that are easy and convenient. Sometimes we misunderstand what you want, and do wrong things when we mean well. Sometimes we *think* we're serving you, when really we're doing what we ourselves want to do. And sometimes we have no desire to serve you at all.

Have mercy on us, we pray; forgive us for our mistakes, our failures, and our lack of commitment. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, strengthen our faith in you, and renew our loyalty to you, so that we may be more faithful as your servant people.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;
and all are justified freely by his grace
through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.*

(Ro 3.23-24)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 43.1-7 “I have summoned you by name”

This reading is a message of hope and encouragement to the people of Israel, who at that time were living in exile in Babylonia. Through the prophet, God promises that he will soon bring the people of Israel back to their own land.

- Psalm: Psalm 29 - “Ascribe to the LORD ...”

Psalm 29 is a psalm of praise.

It sees the thunderstorm as a sign of God’s great power.

Notice how the writer keeps repeating the phrase “the voice of the LORD”. Presumably, he’s referring to the thunder itself, which he considers to be the powerful voice of God.

The words “the voice of the LORD” tie in with today’s Gospel reading, in which the voice of God is heard at Jesus’ baptism.

- Second Reading: Acts 8.4-17 - Samaritan believers receive the Holy Spirit

This reading tells of how church members fled Jerusalem because of persecution that took place following the death of Stephen. They took the message about Jesus to other places, including the territory of Samaria. The “Philip” who’s mentioned in this passage is apparently not Philip the apostle, but rather one of the so-called “deacons”.

Note in particular what is said at the end of the reading about baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

- Gospel Reading: Luke 3.15-22 - The baptism of Jesus

This is Luke’s account of the baptism of Jesus. It overlaps with his account of the ministry of John the Baptist, which we read on the Third Sunday of Advent.

HYMN: Amigos de Cristo

SERMON: “Jesus’ Baptism — and Ours”

On this Sunday each year, we commemorate the baptism of Jesus, an event that Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate on Epiphany. Recall that the word “Epiphany” means “manifestation”. In Jesus’ baptism, then, his true identity as the Son of God was “manifested” — if not to those who were present at the time, then at least to us who read the Gospel accounts centuries later.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of Jesus’ baptism in much the same way, although with some differences in detail. In each of those Gospels, the story of Jesus’ baptism comes immediately after the account of the ministry of John the Baptist.

Only Mark tells the story straightforwardly, however: Jesus goes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, and John baptizes him. Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, both seem to

feel some awkwardness in acknowledging that the greater person (Jesus) was baptized by the lesser person (John). In Matthew's account, John, apparently recognizing Jesus as the one greater than himself whom he has been speaking about, hesitates to baptize him; and Jesus has to assure him that it's all right to go ahead.

In today's reading, Luke deals with the awkwardness differently. Although he says that Jesus was baptized, he does so without saying in so many words that he was baptized by *John* — or in the Jordan River, for that matter. Indeed, by the time that Luke tells the story of Jesus' baptism, he has already told of John's arrest. So, all that Luke says is, *When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too* (Luke 3.21a). It's a small detail, perhaps, but he de-emphasizes John's role by saying "Jesus was baptized" rather than "Jesus was baptized by John".

Beyond that, though, all three accounts go on to describe the supernatural phenomena that took place next: the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus *like a dove* (Luke 3.22a), and the voice of God speaking from heaven, identifying Jesus as his Son (Luke 3.22b). In both Luke and Mark, God says *You are my Son whom I love* (Luke 3.22b; Mark 1.11), while in Matthew's account, God says, *This is my Son whom I love* (Matthew 3.17). In today's reading from Luke, then, the words are addressed to Jesus himself, rather than to John, or to other bystanders. Does this mean that only Jesus himself heard those words? Luke doesn't say; neither does Mark. Nevertheless, we, reading those words *today*, do hear those words spoken by God. They confirm what each of the Gospel writers have already said about Jesus' identity in their respective Gospels.

Again, it is a moment of "epiphany"; Jesus' true identity as the Son of God is "manifested" — revealed — disclosed — made known.

One detail in Luke's account is unique — the fact that Jesus *prays* after his baptism, and that it is *as* he is praying that the supernatural phenomena take place. Luke emphasizes Jesus' prayer life more than the other Gospel writers do; it's something we'll see a number of times, as we work our way through Luke's Gospel this year.

Just as it may seem odd that Jesus should've been baptized by John, it seems odd that he should've been baptized at all, given that Luke refers to John's ministry as "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3.3), as we read on the Third Sunday of Advent. Why would the Son of God need to receive "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"? Luke doesn't answer this question; neither do the other Gospel writers.

I believe the answer lies in the supernatural phenomena that accompanied Jesus' baptism, and also in the fact that, following his baptism, Jesus began his ministry. The fact is that his baptism marked a major turning point in his life. Prior to his baptism, he had earned a living as a carpenter in his hometown of Nazareth, perhaps having taken over the family business from his father, Joseph.

So, with his baptism, Jesus' life changed direction — from being a local carpenter to being a traveling rabbi, speaking about the nearness of the Kingdom of God, and illustrating his

teaching with numerous miracles of healing. In his baptism, his true identity as the Son of God was confirmed, and the Holy Spirit came upon him, presumably to guide and strengthen him in the ministry that he was about to undertake.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke say nothing about Jesus administering baptism himself, though, as John the Baptist had done. However, baptism became a key element in the ministry of the *church*, following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, and following the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In his sermon on Pentecost, the apostle Peter concluded with these words: *Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off — for everyone whom the Lord our God will call* (Acts 2.38-39).

It appears, then, that Jesus' own baptism serves as the prototype for the baptism of everyone who believes in him — that, in baptism, each believer is claimed by God as his son or daughter, and is given the Holy Spirit. In *Jesus'* baptism, God stated what was already the case; in *Christian* baptism, God *adopts* the person as his daughter or son. This ties in with what God says to the people of Israel in today's Old Testament reading, in which he says, *I have summoned you by name; you are mine* (Isaiah 43.1); and *you are precious and honored in my sight, and I love you* (Isaiah 43.4).

Today's reading from the Book of Acts is one of just a few stories in which new believers in Jesus are both baptized and given the Holy Spirit. Philip proclaims the message about Jesus in the region of Samaria, in central Israel. People believe the message, and are baptized. However, for some reason that Luke doesn't explain, they don't at the same time receive the Holy Spirit. Then, when the leaders of the church in Jerusalem hear of the success of Philip's ministry, they send the apostles Peter and John to Samaria. Arriving there, they pray for the new believers, and lay their hands on them, and the Samaritan believers receive the Holy Spirit at last. These Samaritan believers receive the Holy Spirit just as the group of Jesus' original followers had received the Spirit at Pentecost, and just as the Roman centurion Cornelius and his relatives and friends would receive the Spirit two chapters later in Acts.

The accounts of baptisms in the Book of Acts suggest there is no set sequence when it comes to baptism and the giving of the Holy Spirit. What I mean by that is that in *today's* story, the Samaritan believers receive the Holy Spirit some time *after* they were baptized; while in the story about Cornelius, he and his relatives and friends receive the Holy Spirit *before* they are baptized. This serves to remind us that the giving of the Holy Spirit is God's doing, and can't be controlled by human beings. We administer baptism, then, in the hope that God will also give the Holy Spirit, if he hasn't already done so; but we human beings can not force God's hand, as it were.

So, then, just as Jesus' own baptism marked a whole new chapter in his life — Christian baptism does the same for those who receive it today. It marks the beginning of their life as a

Christian, as a child of God, as a member of God's family.

In the New Testament period, baptism was normally administered to adults who came to faith in Jesus — both Jews and pagans. But, for centuries already, it has been customary to baptize people in infancy — which is our custom in the Presbyterian Church, as well.

How and when this change came about is hard to say. There is no record of there having been controversy in the early church about administering baptism to the children of Christian parents, so it appears that the change took place gradually. That is, as time went on, more and more people were baptized in infancy, while fewer and fewer were baptized in adulthood. Indeed, it's possible that baptism was administered to children even in the New Testament itself. For example, in the story of Cornelius and his relatives and friends in Acts, Chapter 10, the whole group is baptized (Acts 10.47-48). If that group included children, presumably they were baptized too. Likewise, in Chapter 16, in the story of Paul and Silas being jailed in Philippi, the jailer becomes a believer in Jesus, and *he and all his household* are baptized (Acts 16.33). If that household included children, presumably they were baptized as well. In any case, the baptism of children is a practice that goes way back in church history.

During the Reformation, however, when all teachings of the church were “up for grabs”, as it were, there were those who challenged the tradition of administering baptism to infants. They claimed that people needed to be able to understand and accept the Christian faith for themselves before they were baptized, which, of course, required them to reach a certain level of maturity. Those who repudiated infant baptism, then, having already been baptized in infancy themselves, insisted upon being baptized again as adults — and for that reason, they were nicknamed “Anabaptists”, meaning people who are baptized again. In Britain, they were called simply “Baptists”. Ever since the Reformation, then, there have been churches that customarily administer baptism to infants — including the Presbyterian Church — and those that require people to attain a certain level of maturity before they can be baptized.

Which opinion is correct? Actually, I believe that there's support for both points of view. People who need to be old enough to understand and accept the Christian faith for themselves before being baptized have the advantage of being taught the essentials of the Christian faith prior to their baptism, and of being able to remember the experience of being baptized afterward. There certainly is something to be said for this approach.

But the practice of infant baptism also is quite legitimate. It recognizes that the Christian life can begin very early in a person's life; that someone doesn't need to be thirteen, sixteen, or eighteen years old before they can have an adequate faith in Jesus. Infant baptism also echoes the Old Testament idea that children born into the community of faith are members of that community right from the beginning. In addition, infant baptism emphasizes God's grace — that God adopts people into his family without their needing to merit or deserve it in any way.

Of course, people still need to affirm the Christian faith for themselves at a later point in their

life, when they are able to understand and accept it, and so we have a secondary ordinance called “making a profession of faith”. In the Presbyterian Church, it is assumed and expected that everyone who is baptized will at a later point in their life, claim for themselves what their parents claimed for them in baptism, by professing the Christian faith for themselves. To that end, the parents are required to make a commitment to raise the child in the Christian faith to the best of their ability; and the congregation is required to make a commitment to support the parents in that endeavor, by among other things, providing a Church School or other form of Christian nurture.

I myself was baptized when I was less than two months old; and understandably, I have absolutely no memory of that experience. Fourteen years later, when I was in Grade 9, I made my profession of faith. I’ve believed in Jesus for as long as I can remember, even though my faith as a child wasn’t as mature as it is now, as an adult.

Although that’s the way things are intended to happen, it’s not always the way things work out, of course. As *Living Faith*, our church’s statement of faith, puts it, *What is born may die. What is grafted may wither* (*Living Faith* 7.6.4). I recall a conversation in my Grade 11 English class once, in which a girl insisted that she was not a Christian, even though she had been baptized. The teacher argued that the fact that she had been baptized meant that she *was* a Christian, whether she liked it or not. I’m not sure I agree with that teacher, though. It seems to me, that if someone renounces their baptism, their having been baptized doesn’t count for much. Ultimately, like any relationship, it’s a two-way street, isn’t it? In baptism, we believe that God adopts us into his family; but we also need to *want* to be adopted into God’s family. I can’t believe that God would adopt us into his family against our will.

In addition, it’s important to remember that baptism isn’t just a private transaction between God and the person being baptized. If God adopts us as his son or daughter in baptism, that means he adopts us into his *family* — that is, the whole *community* of his sons and daughters — in other words, the church. In the Presbyterian Church, therefore, baptized children are considered *members* of the church; we refer to them as “covenant members”. Those who have made a profession of faith, on the other hand, are referred to as “professing members”. Children who are to be baptized should therefore be baptized in the congregation of which their parents are members, and in which their parents participate. Parents sometimes want their child baptized in the congregation in which they themselves were baptized, for sentimental reasons; but it doesn’t make sense to do so if that congregation is in another community, let alone another province or country.

Similarly, children should be baptized by the minister of their own congregation, not by a relative who happens to be a minister. For example, when my niece was to be baptized, I took a Sunday off so I could be present for her baptism. However, when her minister offered to let me do the baptism, I declined. He was her minister, so it was appropriate for him to administer the baptism, not me.

The baptism of Jesus, then, gives us an opportunity to reflect not only on the significance of his baptism, but also on the significance of our own. We believe that, in our baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit is promised, and we are adopted by God into his family. That, then, sets the direction for the rest of our life. Just as Jesus began his ministry following his baptism, we begin a life in which we learn to live in God's ways, and in which we serve God through acts of kindness to others.

HYMN: A little child the Savior came

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

God of grace and love:

Once again, we give you thanks for Jesus, in whom you came into the world in order to bring us closer to you, and to show us what you desire us to be like.

As we commemorate his baptism today, we thank you for what it teaches us about our own baptism: that, in baptism, you adopt us into your family, and give us the Holy Spirit, to guide and empower us to live in your ways. We thank you for your love for us, and we pray that we may feel a similar affection for you and for each other. As we trust in your promises of the Spirit and of adoption, help us also to honor the commitments made in our baptism: to love you, to live in your ways, and to serve you. Help us to keep on affirming and renewing these commitments, we pray, so that we may not lose sight of them, and forget them.

We pray for your continued blessing on your worldwide family, the church. Help us to strive always to be family to each other, and not to let differences of opinion or taste divide us. Forgive us for times when we have fallen short of your expectations, or gone our own ways, we pray; and help us to strive to follow your lead, and to be a community that truly embodies the values of your kingdom.

Hear our prayers for people in our congregation, and others close to us, who find themselves in difficulty today; in particular, those whom we name before you now: _____.

You know each one's needs, and we pray that you would reach out to offer them the blessings they need in their particular circumstances.

Hear also our prayers for the world around us. As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray in particular for those who investigate and prosecute people involved in spreading racial hatred and promoting violence. Bless their efforts, we pray, and grant that their work may prevent violent plans from being carried out. We pray also for those who are attracted to twisted and violent ideologies, that they may recognize them for what they are, and may renounce them.

We pray again about the COVID-19 pandemic, as the new Omicron variant continues to spread. Grant wisdom to public health authorities and governments, as they make decisions on the most effective measures to keep people safe. Grant your wisdom to businesses and services that are short-staffed because of the pandemic, as they struggle to carry on with reduced numbers. Grant your blessing to teachers and students as they are forced to return to online

learning temporarily, and grant them strength to make the best of the situation. Grant strength and stamina to front-line health workers dealing with increased workloads, and reduced time for rest and relaxation. Continue to bless efforts to provide vaccines to those who wish to take advantage of them, and grant that vaccines may become more and more available to people in the poorer countries of the world. We pray for remote communities in the north that are particularly hard-hit by the Omicron variant, that they may receive the support and assistance they need to look after those who are ill, and to provide essential services. We pray for those waiting for tests, treatments, or surgeries that are being delayed because of the pandemic, that they may experience your strength and encouragement as they wait to be looked after.

Once again, we pray for those who have to work outdoors in the cold weather, as well as those who are homeless. We pray for their safety, and we pray that temperatures may indeed moderate in the coming days, as they are expected to.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God; and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Our God and Father:

We are grateful to you for your love for us and your many gifts to us. We thank you for providing for our needs, and for sustaining and encouraging us in times of difficulty. Most of all, we thank you for the privilege of being adopted into your family, and for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who guides and empowers us to live in your ways.

In response to your love and generosity, we present our offerings to you, and dedicate them to your service. May they be used in ways that help you accomplish your loving purpose in the world.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Spirit of God, descend upon my heart

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,
 in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,
 conscious of the fact that you are baptized people —
 children of God, and members of God's family.

And may God bless you:

May he guide and strengthen you to serve him faithfully,
and may he give you his peace and joy in abundance;
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.