

## “Living Into Our Baptism”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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I don't remember my baptism. I do have the certificate to prove that it happened in the year of my birth at the Congregational Church in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts in 1947. I may or may not have had godparents. I do remember starting Sunday School. We learned to fold our fingers into an inverted fist and say: Here's the church; here's the steeple; open the door and see all the people. We even used a thumb to name our minister, Rev. Dawes.

At each subsequent church, my parents enrolled me in church school, had me sit with them in worship, and made sure I read my Bible. They were being faithful to the baptismal vows they spoke when the minister sprinkled water on my head. Eventually, I was confirmed in the Westfield church when I was in ninth grade. From that point on, I was considered an adult, responsible to figure out how I would live into the identity that was bestowed upon me in those waters of baptism. What would it mean for me to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

When Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan, he had a similar question to wrestle with: how will I live into the identity God has given me? What does it mean to be One with whom God is well pleased? To answer this question, Jesus headed to the wilderness. The wilderness is where we often find clarity. For Jesus it meant spending forty days in the wilderness, wrestling with vocation, with identity, with purpose.

After those forty days, he emerged with a clear understanding of the role he was to play in the reign of God.

The wilderness can be a literal place, a desert. Or it can be a figurative place: a state of mind, a time apart, a shifting of gears. In our baptism, we are given an identity. We become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Discerning what that will mean becomes a life pursuit. What it means to us in our teens may not be what it means to us in our thirties or our sixties or our eighties! This work of discerning our Christian identity often takes us to a wilderness of one kind or another. And the wilderness is a place we go to more than once. Henry David Thoreau found he needed to enter the wilderness of Walden Pond quite often! My cousin, Maggie, retreated every summer to an island off the coast of Maine to find again, and to renew her identity as a daughter of God.

When I filled out my application to the Peace Corps, I didn't have a clue that I was actually applying for permission to enter a wilderness where I would finally start wrestling with my baptism identity. In our little town of Salima, Malawi, we met a Southern Baptist missionary named Bud Bickers from Dallas, Texas. We attended his service one day. We sat in the back row. As the worship came to a close, Bud Bickers announced that Mr. Allen would be offering the benediction. The what? I thought to myself, "What's a benediction?" I can tell you I have no memory of what I said, only a memory of that feeling of being totally unprepared. In a way, it was a wake up call for me. Perhaps it was time for me to wrestle with what it could mean for me to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. How could my life ever be a benediction, a blessing to anyone else?

There I was in the wilderness of Central Africa, not far from the place where Henry Stanley encountered the Scottish doctor and said, “Dr. Livingston, I presume?”

It took me more than 40 days in that wilderness. I was well into the second year when I wrote to my minister back in 9<sup>th</sup> grade Confirmation saying, and I quote, “Rev. Gilbert, I feel I have been baptized anew.” What I was really saying was, ‘I am beginning to take seriously what it means to be a disciple.’ I was starting to live into my baptism.

In an urgent sort of way, this is work we all need to do, over and over again. Now that I’m in college, now that I’m a parent, now that I’m unemployed, now that I’ve had a stroke, now that I’ve lost my tenor voice, now that I’m retired, now that I’m single again; how will I live into my baptism? What shape will my discipleship take now?

John the Baptist got clear about his own identity. He was NOT the Messiah. His role was to prepare his community to welcome the Messiah. John spent most of his life in the wilderness. He even learned to like eating grasshoppers! Even Jesus found himself returning to the wilderness multiple times. The Gospel writers say, “And he found his way to a place apart.”

So, on this second Sunday in 2019, I am urging all of us to get to the wilderness, to wrestle yet one more time with what it means NOW to be baptized into the Christian story. What shape will my discipleship take this year? This month? This very day? It’s when congregations wrestle with this question that we know we’re living in the greatest of hope. Amen.

