

The Baptism of Our Lord
Year C
January 9, 2022
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
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Jesus did you know?

Advent feels like it is, in some ways, designed to confuse us. For two Sundays in Advent, we hear stories about John the Baptist, preaching and baptizing in the wilderness, helping his community to get ready for the coming of the Messiah, for the coming of Jesus. And in the church, during the Advent season, we are getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth, so, it would be easy to think that the stories that we hear about John the Baptist, are stories about a fiery preacher who is getting people ready for the birth of the Messiah. But, of course, that's not what's happening at all.

We learn from the gospel of Luke that John, who is Jesus' distant cousin, is only about six months older than Jesus.

The church has one of those pop-up festivals in June, one of those events that helps to remind us that in a world that marks time with days and weeks and months and years; with TGIF and Hump Day and "How can the weekend be over already?", that as Christians, we mark time differently, living within a different story, as we are greeted throughout the year with celebrations and community and remembrances of the great cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints who surround us and pray for us and inspire us with hope and join us in praise.

The festival that I'm talking about is the festival of John the Baptist, which is celebrated on June 24th. This festival is also called the Nativity of St. John the Baptist.

If you count backwards from Christmas Eve, you'll notice that June 24th, is exactly six months earlier. The day when we celebrate John the Baptist and John the Baptist's birth reminds us that John was not much older than Jesus. Just six months.

So, in the Advent stories of John the Baptist's preaching, John the Baptist couldn't have been preaching that Jesus was about to be born. He would have only been six months old had he been announcing Jesus' birth. The stories about and sermons from John the Baptist that we read during Advent are about John the Baptist announcing that Jesus is about to begin his public ministry.

According to Luke 3:23, Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry, which means that John would have been around 30 and a half or 31.

Our gospel reading for today is part of the gospel reading that we read on the third Sunday in Advent. The part that overlaps is Luke 3:15-17:

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.' (Luke 3:15-17)

Today John the Baptist's story is finally located in its appropriate place in time as this gospel reading is read in its context. John was by the Jordan river preaching and baptizing, calling people to change their lives and to prepare for coming of the Messiah. And Jesus came to the river to be baptized.

We know so little about Jesus' life between his birth and his baptism.

Matthew tells us the story about the wise men and the escape to Egypt. Luke tells us that Jesus was raised in a religious household, circumcised on the eighth day after his birth and presented to the Lord in the Temple forty days after his birth according to Jewish law. Luke also gives us the story about Jesus getting left behind in Jerusalem and being found in the Temple with the teachers of the law. The gospels of Mark and John don't say anything at all about Jesus' life before he showed up at the river Jordan to be baptized and to begin his ministry.

So, we don't know what happened to send the fully human and fully divine Jesus to the river.

Was the age of 30 some previously implanted time for him? Did he receive some sign to go, some sign that his time had come? Or did Jesus go to the river not knowing that his trip to hear his cousin John preach, to stand with the crowd and be exhorted to change his life, to feel the waters close over his head, would be the moment when everything changed for him, would be the moment he would leave the life that he had lived until that point behind.

It is that moment for us too. According to the secular calendar, the year changed a week and a day ago, but we have been in the midst of our Christmas celebration. My household is not the only household on our street

who have been hanging onto the vestiges of the Christmas celebration of last year, hanging onto the lights, the trees, the decorations.

But this week a couple of trees have been seen out on the curb. One by one the Christmas lights have been turned off. Normally we are the last people on the street who take down our decorations, always waiting until after Epiphany to undecorate, but we can't dodge the task anymore. This week will be the week of undecorating at home, as piece by piece we take down the evidence of last year's celebration.

Here at church on Friday, the Friday Night Live youth took down most of Christmas decorations in the Sanctuary. They took the wreaths on the windows and the ornaments off of the Christmas tree.

Yesterday the Avelar family took the tree down, and I cleaned up the nativity scene. The poinsettias were removed from the Sanctuary, and the Christmas banners were taken down.

By any measure, Christmas is over. It's a new year and a new season and it's time to move on, to leave what is past in the past and to see what this new year, what this new season has in store for us.

Like I said, we have no way of knowing if Jesus knew, when he went to hear John the Baptist preach, when he went, like others who shared his religion, to the banks of the Jordan river, to hear about the new thing that God was doing, that it would be a lifechanging moment for him.

Did Jesus know, was he sure that he was the one that John was talking about? Did he know that he was the one who would come after, the more powerful one, the one who would let loose the wind and fire of the Spirit, the one would who sift and sort and harvest and gather and burn? Did he

know that he was the one whose time had come? Or did he imagine that he was just one of the crowd?

Had Mary, who had treasured the extraordinary stories about his birth and pondered them in her heart, told him about them as he grew? Did he know about the shepherds and the angels, the wise men and the stars? Did he know about Anna and Simeon, that devout Jews who had spent their lives waiting for the Messiah had seen him, when he was just forty days old, and had rejoiced, knowing that their hopes had been fulfilled and that the sight of him had led them to praise God for God's goodness? Did he remember his time in Jerusalem, his time when he had been lost, but also found in the Temple that he called his Father's house?

It had been a long time. Years, almost twenty years and so much had happened. He had learned his trade from Joseph, and, of course, Joseph, the man who had helped raise him, who had been his father in his heart, though not his father by blood, had died. Jesus had cared for Mary his mother and for his sisters and brothers, he had continued to ply his trade and to practice his religion, he had lived a life, but, one day he had gone to the river, expecting change.

No one who went to the river, no one who went to hear John the Baptist preach went expecting not to change. Change was John's message; change was John's ministry. We know that Jesus went, with an open heart and an open mind, looking for God to reach him, to touch him, to change him. We just don't know exactly what he expected that to look like.

Was the Holy Spirit who descended on him, was the voice from heaven, was the claiming of "beloved son" a surprise, or did he know that his time had come? Was the voice from heaven a surprise or was it a confirmation?

Regardless of which it was, it was a new beginning for Jesus. From that moment on he never looked back, he travelled and told stories and healed people and gathered friends and companions, he ate with sinners, he spoke words of forgiveness and he set his face to Jerusalem, where the one who had come to harvest and to judge, would become the one who would die, and rise and save.

We on this day, are invited to a new way, a new start, to walk a new road, to see what possibilities God had in store for us.

Perhaps we have grown too wise, perhaps we have learned too much, perhaps we have been too wounded, by things that have gone before to imagine that a new year, a new season, that a world shining with a blanket of snow, that bodies sprinkled with baptismal waters, could possibly mean a completely new start, could possibly mean that we can approach this new year with unmitigated hope, with unquestioning hearts, with a starry-eyed optimism, and with ambitious resolutions that imply that we think that we can control what this year will look like for us.

But maybe there is a reason for stars in our eyes. Because there is a star shining in our sanctuary. It shines as a reminder those who follow the light, those who seek the light find Jesus waiting for them. And the season that we have just finished, the Christmas season, with its good news of God with us told us, even better and more importantly, that Jesus has come to get us.

And just as Jesus himself found good news in the waters of baptism, we hear good news today. The same Lord who claimed Jesus as a beloved son, claims us too, as beloved children, and no matter what has gone before and no matter what lies ahead the Holy Spirit fills us and God's love goes with us into this new year. Thanks be to God. Amen.

