

## On the Road with Jesus: Going Up to Jerusalem (Baptism) Luke 3:15-22; NRSV

**Big Idea:** Our baptism is only the *first* of many life defining moments when God calls us and uses us for his purposes.

How many of you can remember when you graduated from high school or college? Or when you made the decision to marry the person who eventually became your spouse? What about the moment you saw your newborn son or daughter for the first time or maybe your grandchildren? Taking our cue from the scripture lesson this morning, what is your memory of the time when you first came to faith in Christ and announced that profession to the world through your baptism?

Peter von Keyserling and I drove to Richmond yesterday to worship with a messianic Jewish congregation called Tikvat Israel.<sup>1</sup> You may remember they played music and danced for us at our Fun Fest back in 2008. Yesterday, their rabbi spoke about defining moments in life, events and experiences which leave us and our lives dramatically changed, who and how we are forever transformed. **(Pause)**

It is written in Luke 9:51 that “when the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” That was a life-defining moment for Jesus; it ultimately resulted in his being crucified. Today, however, today, at his baptism, is where the journey begins. It’s at his baptism that Jesus commits to the will of the Father. At his baptism Jesus makes a very intentional, conscious decision that who he is, all that he is, his hopes and dreams, all that he has — are given up unto God’s purpose for his life. And the Father blesses and affirms that decision: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am *well* pleased.”

Now I know, theologically speaking, we struggle with this, with Jesus’ baptism, with Jesus having to make a choice just like you and I have to make choices. Jesus was/is the third person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus is the very Son of God. Many Christians understand his life and destiny to be “locked in” so to speak. Yet, Jesus — Emmanuel, God with us, among us, in the world with us — was also very much like us. Like us, he had to eat to sustain his life. While the “cattle were lowing” and the shepherds were

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<sup>1</sup>Literally, “Hope of Israel”

ooing and aaahing, Jesus, like all babies, was very likely filling his diaper. While journeying from one place to another, Jesus became physically tired and he thirsted for water just as we do. You will recall that when he sat down by the well in Samaria while his disciples went to buy food, he began his conversation with the woman by asking for a drink of water. And just like you and I have to make choices about whether we will allow God to rule and reign in our lives, so also did Jesus. He made such a choice in the garden of Gethsemane (Lk. 22:39 ff) and he made such a choice alongside the river of Jordan when he heard his cousin, John, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin” (Lk. 3:3).

There were many such defining moments in Jesus’ life: his baptism, his temptations in the wilderness, his transfiguration, the cleansing of the temple, his prayer that the cross which lay beyond Gethsemane might be avoided. What all this signifies is a process, an evolving, ongoing process in which the Lord of all is confronted with faith-challenging, life-changing, heart-transforming choices. Not just at his baptism, not just during his time of being tempted in the wilderness, but continually, again and again throughout his ministry. **(Pause-Pause)**

This morning we’re going to set out on a journey with Jesus which will end at Calvary on Good Friday. Through the witness of the scriptures, we’re going on the road with Jesus. We’re going to look at some of these defining moments in his life and ministry. We’re going to hear him preach to the crowds on the mountain and teach those who follow him to Jerusalem; and we’re going to prayerfully allow the Holy Spirit to distill our thoughts and purify our hearts even as gold passes through a refiner’s fire. The seasons of Advent and Christmas are great blessings, but it is Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ, and Lent, as we journey to the cross, which will shape us and mold us into more effective Christ-followers. Today we begin the journey. **(Pause-Pause)**

Let me ask you again, how do you think about your baptism, or perhaps, more to the point, how do you remember the faith decision which led to your baptism? What was it like? How did you feel? What

difference has it made in your life? In the way you perceive the world around you? In how you order your daily comings and goings? In how you relate to others? In how you use the resources with which God has blessed you?

This morning, I want to suggest that our baptism is only the beginning of a lifelong, ongoing process of transformation which doesn't end until we go to be with the Lord or the Lord returns for us. Far too many Christians understand baptism as an end in and of itself. Salvation achieved. Fire insurance paid up. Everything is now A-OK. However, just as with Jesus, we have many such defining moments on this journey with God, each of which confronts us with a choice.

So, what is the significance of our baptism? Is it just a paid-up life insurance policy? A sign that I'm "in" even if I'm followed by a wisp of smoke?

Taking our cue from the baptism of Jesus, I want to suggest first that our baptism, like his, **signifies a change of course**. In verse three of that third chapter of Luke, we're told that the baptism offered by John the Baptist was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin." And the gospels make it plain that Jesus of Nazareth willingly chose to submit to this baptism.

Like us, John struggles with this in the gospel of Matthew. He says to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus responds, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

I have to confess, along with one of my favorite commentators, Bill Long, that I'm not sure exactly what this means in its fulness. We understand Jesus to be without sin, the Lamb of God without blemish who dies for the sins of the world. Yet, he submitted to John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin." The essence of repentance is a change of course, an intentional turning toward God — God's will, God's purposes, God's intent for our lives. Thus, a significant part of the meaning of Jesus' baptism is a public commitment and a turning of his earthly life into the wind of ministry intended and purposed for

him by the Father. Heretofore, Jesus has been the relatively unknown son of Joseph and Mary. It is now, at his baptism, that he comes out of the shadows and in righteousness — that is through right action — openly charts a particular course for his life. Like so with us. Our baptism publically signals a change of course, a new direction. It isn't the end of the journey; it is only the beginning.

Secondly, Jesus' **baptism issues in the anointing of the Holy Spirit which gives Jesus — and us — “a redemptive identity.”**<sup>2</sup> The Father says to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In the living out of this identity, additional “defining moments” will come for Jesus, just as they come for us. For Jesus, there were competing challenges regarding the stewardship of his life. Different folks had different expectations, different wants, competing claims. And Jesus will be forced to *choose* how he will respond to those claims — how he will use the time granted unto him by the Father, how he will use this power and identity bestowed upon him by the Holy Spirit.

Like Jesus, at our baptism we also receive a distinctly unique redemptive identity. We become known as the children of God, Christ-followers, the redeemed, God's own people.

Third, because of this turning toward God and the receiving of this redemptive identity, Jesus' baptism *and our baptism is a commissioning, a call to action*. God's mission becomes Jesus' mission and Jesus' becomes our mission. It's a call to action and a mission which will result in different kinds of ministry, the carrying out of many kingdom tasks. It's a commissioning which demands our allegiance. It's a call which instills our life with new purpose and meaning. It is the beginning of many “defining moments.” **(Pause-Pause)**

The baptism of Jesus which signified a change of course for his life, which anointed him with the Holy Spirit and gifted him with a clearly defined, redemptive identity, and which issued forth in a call to action serves the same purpose in our lives. It is a defining moment among many defining moments

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<sup>2</sup>John Stendahl, *The Christian Century*, December 24-31, 1997, p. 1219.

across the course of our Christian journey and signifies not a closed book or finished chapter in our lives, but rather a process of becoming which continues across the course of our lives. **(Pause)**

John Stendahl, a Lutheran pastor, has written about the time when, as an adult with children of his own, he came across a book of baby trivia his mother had put together when he came into the world — you know, a lock of hair, first booties, a rattle, those kinds of things. In his baby book, Stendahl found his mother’s written description of how on the day of his birth she held him on her belly as she lay in the bed, and welcomed him into the world. He wrote, “With me there in that hospital room, she offered up [a great thanksgiving]: ‘You are my son, the beloved; with you I am *well*<sup>3</sup> pleased’.” He goes on to say that not many years after having been thus welcomed into the world, he learned to heed his mother’s voice — calling him home from playtime to meals, to homework and chores. The welcoming was crucial, but it was only the beginning.

We need to drive down a stake with the memory of our baptism, a stake which says our heavenly Father has finally and fully welcomed us into the world as he intends us to be in the world. And we need to understand that saving welcome not as something done or finished, but as a initiation into many such moments when we hear the voice of God calling us to be and to do and to become. Our journey with Jesus will consist of many such moments until our identity and our call are fully realized and we hear the King of Glory who calls us and names us says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master.” Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.