

“God Opens the Heavens”

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Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

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**<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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.”**

**<sup>21</sup>Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”**

Let's go for a moment to the banks of the River Jordan where Jesus is being baptized. Here he makes his first public appearance on the stage of human history. John the Baptist, repentance-preaching, fire-breathing John, had prepared the people for a Messiah who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And here he is, Jesus, going under the water and coming up out of the water. While he prays his own baptismal prayer, suddenly heaven itself opens, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, a voice comes from heaven speaking to Jesus, but in a way that all who are gathered can hear: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased."

My beloved! Each Sunday we celebrate a baptism in this congregation, I am filled with joy. There is so much anticipation by the congregation, the family and the children! It's as if the heavens have opened up and all is right with the world. I wish you could see your faces as Beckie embraces the child to be baptized and calls him or her by name and bathes that child in the sacramental waters of baptism. It is such a wonderful, awe-filled moment: A cry from the baby, the light of the parent's eyes, the relief of the grandparents, the wonder from each of you as you behold this child of God. I wonder if that was the feeling of those gathered to be baptized in the River Jordan? “As the people were filled with expectation and wondering about John.” What are we expecting when we experience baptism?

The young son of a Baptist minister was in church one morning when he saw for the first time baptism by immersion. He was greatly interested in it, and the next morning proceeded to baptize ... you guessed it .... his three cats in the bathtub.

The youngest kitten bore it very well, and so did the younger cat, but the old family tomcat rebelled.

The old feline struggled with the boy, clawed and tore his skin, and finally got away. With considerable effort the boy caught the old tom again and proceeded with the “ceremony.”

But the cat acted worse than ever, clawing and spitting, and scratching the boy’s face.

Finally, after barely getting the cat splattered with water, he dropped him on the floor in disgust and said, “Fine, be a Methodist if you want to!”

Several years ago, Peter and I shared the great joy of baptizing our nephew Joseph. As his parents, my sister and brother-in-law, my brother and family gathered to bring him to the baptismal font, he was swinging his legs, cooing and smiling. Peter poured the water of baptism on his head and said the words, "I baptize you, Siemete Joseph, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Names are so very important in baptism. In his baptism, we called him by name—Siemete Joseph. And we believe that God called Joseph by name too, and that his name was joined forever to God's name, just as all who are baptized have their names called, have their names joined forever to God's name.

Now the truth of the matter is that none of us knows what Joseph's life will hold in the future. We pray that his life will be full of joy, health and peace, but we also know that, being human, he will also face pain and loss and sorrow. We know, as the prophet Isaiah knew, that faith does not protect us from the realities of life. He will, like all human beings, pass through the waters of life's hardships. But we also know that God knows his name, that God created him, formed him, redeemed him, and calls him by name. God will never forget him, will never leave him alone, will come to him and will be with him at every turn.

Baptism is a "visible sign of invisible grace.” Baptism teaches us who we are – God’s beloved children – and bestows upon us the promise of God’s unconditional love. In a time when so many of the traditional elements of our identities have been diminished – we change jobs and careers with frequency, most of us have multiple residences rather grown up and live in a single community, fewer families

remain intact – there is a craving to figure out just who we are. In response to this craving and need, baptism reminds us that we discover *who* we are in relation to *whose* we are, God's beloved.

In a production of Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Gospel*, an excellent actor Tom Key played God. Not a bad role if you can get it. Tom stood on a ladder on the stage. The actor playing the recently immersed Jesus stood below him looking up with hope and perhaps a little bit of anxiety in his eyes. But he needn't have worried. God speaks in a voice loud enough to be heard all the way down the Street: "You are my boy, Jesus. I am so proud of you!"

Everyone could feel in the marrow of their bones the exuberant love and approval in the actor's voice. In baptism we believe something similar happens between God and us in our own baptisms: "This one is mine!" the Lord exclaims. "I see my image in her! Don't you see my image in him? And here comes my Spirit, my Spirit to sustain and guide as you go about doing what I put you on earth to do."

Here is the deal. God chooses to bring us into the world. God's grace claims us and reclaims us over and over again. We don't need to get all excited over whether or not we are adequate or worthy. With the exception of Jesus, we are all unworthy and without hope saved by God's mercy. I love the story about an incident following an infant baptism. On the way home after worship, the brother of the baby who had been baptized cried from the back seat all the way home. Three times his dad asked him what he was crying about. Finally, he answered, "The preacher said he wanted us to be brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys."

We who are baptized struggle just like everybody else to be decent humans. We are no more or less tempted than anybody else to be less than God created us to be, but Jesus our Lord showed us how to beat the temptations back, and God gave us the power to choose a better way. From our baptism onward, we live inside the promise that we will have a strength that comes from another world enabling us to work for God's good pleasure. I love the thought of God standing on a ladder somewhere saying, "Do you see my girl down there? I am so proud of her. She's not perfect, but she's mine."

When we are baptized, God holds us close and says, "I know this one. I called this one by name. This one belongs to me. I KNOW YOU BY NAME."

It is indeed a hard and difficult world. No one can say what will happen to the economy. It would be a lie to say that we know when terror may strike. God does not promise to lift us out of the struggles of life. What God does say is that we will not be alone. God formed us in the womb. God knows the numbers of the hairs of

our head. God calls us by name. When we go through life's waters, God will be with us. When all hell breaks loose around us, there is God holding our hand, calling us by name.

A well-known theologian once confessed that he was plagued many nights by a terrible dream. He dreamed that he was traveling in some distant city, and he ran into someone with whom he had gone to high school. In the bad dream, the person would say, "Henri, Henri, haven't seen you in years. What have you done with your life?" This question always felt like judgment. He'd done some good things in his life, but there had also been some troubles and struggles. And when the old schoolmate in the dream would say, "What have you done with your life?" he wouldn't know what to say, how to account for his life. Then one night he had another dream. He dreamed that he died and went to heaven. He was waiting outside the throne room of God, waiting to stand before almighty God, and he shivered with fear. He just knew that God would be surrounded with fire and smoke and would speak with a deep voice saying, "Henri, Henri, what have you done with your life?" But, then, in the dream, when the door to God's throne room opened, the room was filled with light. From the room he could hear God speaking to him in a gentle voice saying, "Henri, it's good to see you. I hear you had a rough trip, but I'd love to see your slides."

So the Lord says, "I know you. I have called you by name. You are mine." Thanks be to God!

As children known and loved by God through baptism. Let us recommit ourselves to live as God's beloved, God's chosen by renewing our baptism.

LITANY

In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts," he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked.

He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper." Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.

Back in 1976, America's bicentennial year, a very creative writer came up with an intriguing idea. "Our nation is 200 years old," he thought. "I'll bet I can find someone who is alive today who is old enough that when they were a child, they remember someone who was then old enough to have been alive at the founding of the nation, a living link to the beginning of the country." And, sure enough, he found such a person. He was a Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford, who was over 100 years old in 1976; and he remembered when he was a little boy being taken by a wagon to see his great-great grandmother who was then over 100 herself and who was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first American president.

When the writer asked Burnham what he remembered, he said he remembered being taken into his great-great grandmother's house. She was feeble. She was blind. She was sitting in an old chair in the corner of a dark bedroom. "We brought Burnham to see you," his father said. The old woman turned toward the sound and reached out with long, bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, "Bring him here."

"They had to push me toward her," Burnham remembered. "I was afraid of her. But when I got close to her, she reached out her hands and began to stroke my face. She felt my eyes and my nose, my mouth and my chin. And all at once, she seemed to be satisfied, and she pulled me close to her and held me tight. 'This boy's a Ledford,' she said, 'I can feel it. I know this boy. He's one of us.'"