

Pass It On
A Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Deborah Hart
at Eglinton St. George's United Church
January 17, 2010

Readings: Acts 8: 4-8, 12, 14-17; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

The Sunday after Epiphany is always the story of Jesus' baptism. I find it rather amusing to think that Jack, whom we baptized this morning, played baby Jesus on Christmas Eve at the 5 p.m. service, and so in a manner of speaking Connie baptized "Jesus" again today! In Luke's version Jesus joins the multitude of people who go out to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. None of this sprinkling of water on your forehead! One was fully immersed, symbol of dying to your old self and beginning a new life, making a conscious choice to change one's ways.

The air was filled with expectation as the Jewish people hoped for a Messiah, someone who would come and bring them better days, and even free them from the Roman Occupation. Perhaps this John the Baptizer was the one? He certainly sounded like one of their prophets of old, warning them to repent and change their ways. But no, he said there was one greater still to come.

No one had really heard of Jesus, it seems, until this moment, except his cousin John and the relatives, who knew there was something special about him. His baptism is his first "public debut". Like a good person of faith, he offers a prayer as he is being baptized, but then we're told that the heavens opened and the Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice was heard, proclaiming: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Wow! Today we picture it as a Hollywood moment, complete with shining rays of light and a booming ethereal voice with thousands gathered 'round to hear. And we all secretly wish that God would make such a wonderful pronouncement about us!

Whatever happened that day, big or small, for Jesus it marked the beginning of his public ministry, and soon people began to listen to what he had to say and to follow him. He was intriguing and seemed full of wisdom, as if coming from beyond himself.

We know the story as it develops. Enough people start to follow him that the local religious as well as Roman authorities get nervous. Could he inspire a revolt? A challenge to their authorities? Within three short years he would be killed for his beliefs. End of story? Not exactly...

And here is where it gets interesting... The author of the Gospel of Luke writes a second book, which will become known as The Acts of the Apostles, telling of the beginnings of the early church. He can think of no other way to describe the phenomena of that small Jesus' movement than to say that in some mysterious way, that same Spirit and power that came upon Jesus at his baptism, came upon his followers after his death. They changed from followers to leaders, and an organic movement emerged. It might just have been a local movement in the area of Jerusalem and perhaps Galilee where Jesus spent much of his time, except for two events.

The **first** was persecution that came from the Jewish authorities. Threatened by this new movement that was gaining momentum, they began to persecute the leaders, putting them in jail,

challenging them in debate and then finally some planted false witness against one of the leaders named Stephen. It led to his stoning, and then began the persecution of all who claimed to be followers of this Jesus movement. This is what the verses immediately before today's reading in Acts are all about. But rather than squelching the movement it forced it out into new territory.

Throughout the stories of Jesus we have heard all about the hated neighbours, the despised Samaritans. But now... as we heard today, Philip, one of the new Christian leaders forced to leave Jerusalem, went of all places to Samaria, and preached to them about the Messiah, and healed many. And lo and behold, the people listened and wanted to join in. Philip baptized them and word got back to Jerusalem about this.

Now I think this would have been a critical moment for that newly forming church leadership. They could have been like the Jewish leaders who were threatened by the Jesus movement and wanted to hold on to power and keep the reigns in Jerusalem and among "their own kind". But no, they sensed the Spirit, something way more powerful than themselves, at work here. And so they sent Peter and John, two of the key leaders from Jerusalem to the region of Samaria and confirmed the baptisms by the laying on of hands so that the people of Samaria, their once despised neighbours and distant relatives, received the gift of the Holy Spirit too, and were now welcomed in. The persecution would continue and despite that, the Gospel would also continue to be spread from town to town and region to region.

The **second** event, which ironically helped to spread the Christian message rather than squelch it, was the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple and the attempted destruction of the Jewish community by the Romans about the year 67. And so both the Jewish and Christian communities were scattered further. Christianity began to adapt to the various cultures it encountered and so grew in strength, whether openly or underground for the first few centuries, until Emperor Constantine was converted to the faith in the year 325 C.E.

So there's your little bit of Church History this morning! Who would have guessed that from that movement out in the desert of which John the Baptist was a part, that the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry in a small geographical area for such a few short years, would lead, in the face of countless persecutions, to millions around the world doing exactly what we have done this morning, claiming three infants are now members of that same movement, and will be raised as followers of Jesus Christ?

Peter Merrick and I, in planning for this morning, were musing about whether any of us here would be willing to bring our children or grandchildren for baptism or be willing to sign up for membership ourselves if we knew that it would be a **dangerous** thing to do. What if you knew that the police might drop by unannounced any day now to seize our church records and find the names on our membership roll in order to harass you? Would the Christian message be so compelling to you, so life-giving that you would still sign up, show up, and pass it on to the next generation no matter what? Countless Christians have had to make that choice.

Most of us were raised in decades when to be Christian was the norm. Everyone around went to church on Sundays. And society supported us by closing down everything else on Sundays. Worship was the priority. Not now. Once again, we have to make a conscious choice to be part of this faith movement. It may not be persecution that challenges us, but there are lots of other gods and priorities that seek to lure us on a Sunday morning, as well as other ethical and moral approaches to life that tempt us in our work places and the other six days of the week.

What does it really mean to take vows as members and parents do here regularly, to profess our faith, to commit to following the way of Christ in our public and private lives, to grow together in faith with our children and grandchildren, and participate in the life of the church so that we may be strengthened to serve God faithfully in the world?

Those are counter-cultural promises today, just as they were in the early church. And the answers to those vows should not roll off our tongues lightly. If we don't take these commitments seriously, the church will gradually fade from existence.

It used to be that the Canadian government consulted the various church leaders and sought their wisdom about issues of importance. But our influence has waned in recent decades. We as churches watch what we say and do a little more carefully, as our charitable status could be revoked. KAIROS, which is one of our main Canadian churches' ecumenical voices throughout the world, and source of aid and justice work, apparently said or did something the Harper government didn't like and so recently got its funding pulled. We signed petitions about this last month. Maybe we still are a threat or challenge to those who would try to conform us to their agendas rather than the Gospel agenda? Maybe the Christian message is still one that stirs the hearts of people to respond in ethical and moral ways against the culture of greed and me-first mentality.

John the Baptist long long ago called people to accountability for their lives. He encouraged them not to coast on the laurels of what their ancestors had done or believed, but to take responsibility for their own lives and faith and salvation. He told them to bear good fruit. They asked him: "What then should we do?" He replied: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even the tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'

Perhaps each of us can ask God today: "What should I do to bear good fruit, to live out my baptismal vows and pass on the faith in 2010?" In the midst of the news stories of the earthquake disaster in Haiti, we have also been hearing stories of Canadians and others who were there in that desperately poor country offering assistance from a faith or humanitarian perspective to make a difference. Some of them died, trying to live out their faith in generous concrete, simple ways. How will people recognize that we are people of faith in what we say and do?

On my way here this morning I ended up behind a church van that had on its bumper: "Follow me to Jesus." I thought this might be an easy answer and so I attempted to follow the van, but alas... we got separated at a stop light! I guess each of us has to find our own way to "follow Jesus."

Last Sunday Don asked us if having spent time at the manger over the Christmas season had made any difference in our lives. Today I ask if having been to the font and reminded of our gifts of the waters of life and the Spirit's blessing, and being named as beloved children of God, will make any difference in the way we leave this place today.

I trust it will. Go with confidence and joy, and thankful hearts that you are part of such an amazing community of faith, and be ready to make a difference in our world. Pray too that the Spirit of gentleness and restlessness will stir us all from placidness and move us to faithfulness. Amen.