

January 29, 2017 “What Does It Mean?” Luke 3:15-23

As I began the process of writing, I could not help but smile. What came to mind was the statement...today you have to do a test. The question on the test, (there is only one), is describe the Jordan river. Give yourself 10 marks if you thought, “O, I know this. Its about the size of Rawdon Creek. Give yourself another 10 marks if you said, “The water is really dirty.” In fact it is about the colour of gravy that gets served with the turkey at Christmas time. Give yourself another 10 marks if you remembered that it only looks like a Canadian creek, babbling over rocks and clear as can be only at its source up on the Golan heights. Give yourself another 5 marks if you remembered that there are places where most of us can remember a time, when we could have jumped over it. And another 5 marks if you remembered it is the only fresh water stream in Israel. If you did not remember any of those things...well, that's why the minister told you the answers!

John the Baptist, son of Elizabeth, a cousin to Jesus, was studying in the community at Qumran. You might recognize that name, because in the late 1940 s they discovered a cache of manuscripts stored in clay jars at Qumran. Some of the manuscripts were in pristine condition. Others had been reduced to scraps by time and exposure to the air, and because shepherds herded goats in the area. And apparently they regarded the papyrus as a tasty snack. Many of the manuscripts are among the oldest originals of the books of the Bible.

Luke is as precise about the timing of this episode as he could be given they had neither modern clocks, nor calendars. It was the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother

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Philip was tetrarch in Itruria and Traconitus. Annas and Caiaphas, were high priests in Jerusalem. And what happened in this time was that the word came to John, the son of Zachariah, in the desert at Qumran. God called John. He left the community, the seminary, the monastery at Qumran and he went to all the country around the Jordan river. He preached and he baptized. His message was simple and direct. Repent of your sins. Seek the forgiveness of God. Be washed in the water of the Jordan. He became known as John the Baptist, the baptizer.

If you are looking for proof that God called him to the task, to that ministry, Luke tells us why he believed it was a calling of God. Crowds of ordinary people responded to his message. Crowds of people came to the Jordan river, to hear him and to walk down into the water to surrender to God and be baptized by John. He would take them in his arms...they are for the most part adults...and lay them down under the water. And then raise them up into the sunlight. It was like death and resurrection. It was about new life. Life lived and dedicated to God and his way. A fresh start. Being clean again. A rebirth. One day, as John was baptizing the crowd of people, Jesus came to the Jordan and joined the line up. He went down into the river. John baptized HIM.

Some special things happened when John baptized Jesus. First of all when John raised Jesus up out of the water, a dove flew down and settled on Jesus shoulder. There were people present who immediately said or later told Luke, it was the sign of the Holy Spirit's presence in HIM. God blessing Jesus for this moment of submission. This pursuit of the grace of God. This willingness to do what HIS heavenly Father wanted HIM to do. And some people said, and later it was told to Luke, that they heard the voice of God

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proclaim, “You are my beloved son, and I am very pleased with you.” And at the time Jesus was about 30 years old.

What does it mean? Well, here is where I begin to answer that question. The first in a list of meanings is this. No matter how hard you try, the fact is you cannot get back beyond a time when these details were believed about Jesus. In other words it takes a willful act of man to say, I do not believe what Luke tells us. And there are certainly those who take that position. We need to be aware that we live in an age when there are parts of the church (world wide), that are at best skeptical of the dependability of the Scriptures...especially where the Scriptures claim that God speaks, or God acts in the midst of the world. I reject that skepticism, that criticism which fundamentally makes the choice, that the Bible could not possibly mean what it says. I also reject the corollary to that statement, that we in our time are wiser, than were the people of Jesus time. To reject the fact of God's presence is not wisdom, nor is it faithfulness.

So, I repeat, we cannot get back beyond a time when these things were believed to be the facts of the matter. This story is as old as is the gospel of Luke. Luke was careful to try and tie it down to time and place, hence the list of Roman and Jewish figures who held responsible positions. They are all of them historical figures. Archeology has verified the facts of their lives. So again, the legitimate question is what does it all mean?

First of all it means that Jesus public ministry began, following this act of his at the river Jordan where he submitted to John the Baptist's ministry and was baptized in the water. This is the way Jesus chose to mark the beginning of what we refer to as HIS

three years of public ministry. He was baptized with water, and God approved and people were aware that God approved.

It means that one of the things we need to say about our own being baptized is that first and foremost the faithfulness of being baptized is in the fact that Jesus was baptized. We do this, and we celebrate this, and we submit to this because Jesus did. Now, I was not baptized in the manner in which Jesus was baptized. I was not taken to McVickers Creek in Port Arther and dipped, (some would use the word “dunked” in the waters. I was not taken to Boulevard Lake in Port Arthur (Boulevard Lake gets warmer in the summertime than does Lake Superior). I was not dipped in the waters of a local lake or pond or pool or river. I was sprinkled, or a handful of water was poured through my hair, and lovingly kept out of my eyes, so that I did not scream. I was an infant. My parents made the decision to have me baptized at what they regarded as their church.

And as a result as a teenager in my late teens, I had to answer the questions of the church, for myself. I professed my belief in Jesus. I professed my faith in HIM as Saviour and Lord. And what has unfolded in my life, has unfolded from that particular experience. Some would argue it is not the same as what is described here. I can only testify to its effectiveness. Water was used. The requirement of making a choice, first on the part of my parents, and later I answered for myself, were all part of the package. And my parents did those things, and as a young adult I affirmed those things for myself, because of what is written here. I was baptized and confirmed what that baptism meant, because Jesus was baptized.

But what are we to say of the miraculous elements...the descent of the dove, and the interpretation of that event as Luke shares with us? And what are we to say about the voice of God that speaks to the question of the divinity of the Son, and God's pleasure in HIM?

I cannot speak for others. I can only speak for myself. When I came to faith in Jesus in my late teens I was very conscious of what I was doing and thinking and saying. It went something like this: I was aware that I had discovered that God is real. That Jesus saves. That the Holy Spirit touches us (and in those circumstances to question the reality of the God who is Father and Son and Holy Spirit, is surely foolishness). I chose the way of faith as opposed to the way of foolishness. It was as obvious as the reality of the tree outside my bedroom window. My experience with the Bible as a whole is that its words are dependable. I resent it when people who claim to be leaders in the church try to explain away the fact of God's presence, His grace, His saving love, and His present Spirit.

And when I look back over the last 48 years, years spent ministering to people God gave me responsibility for, I am amazed at what I have seen and heard. If I have been in any way, effective as a minister of the church, I must confess I had nothing to offer anyone...except the Biblical word, filtered through my own experience as a believer, the power to pray that the Lord would make himself known to HIS people, and would comfort them in the face of difficulty, illness and even death.

I am also amazed that I never seemed to falter in terms of finding it possible to continue to believe. Having pursued God, having sought to be in Christ, having sought the continuing presence

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of the Holy Spirit, and having dined on Scriptural teaching, in the midst of the people of God, I think I discovered this...which is part of what this morning's reading means... “All the way my Saviour leads me, what have I to ask beside?/ Can I doubt his tender mercy who through life has been my guide?/ Heavenly peace, divinest comfort, here by faith in him to dwell;/ for I know what e're befalls me, Jesus doeth all things well.”

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father, lead us day by day and step by step. In the midst of difficult circumstances, make us aware of your gracious presence. When we are tempted by the questioning ways of this age, open our eyes to your truth and to those who steadfastly witness to your being present with us. Empower your people to be clothed in the victory of the resurrection of Jesus. Amen