

A Whisper Heard Round the World

Shepherd's Grace Church

January 13, 2013

Luke 3:15-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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." ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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." (Read Also Isaiah 43: 1-7)

Context: We have just welcomed a new family into our congregation. Jeff and Becca Hodges bring Blake and Cliff as well as their extended family and they come to a new place, not to start a new journey, but to continue a journey of faith that brings each of us to this place, to this moment, to this Jesus who will save us from our sins, but save us for what? What does it mean to be baptized? What does it mean to be in a relationship with others who are baptized? What does it mean to be part of a church? What does it mean to be called a child of God; to hear the words, "This is my child, You are my child" "With you I am well pleased?"

So, two weeks ago, we were in Branson with the youth of Shepherd's Grace. We were there for a Christian rock concert. The youth are going to tell you more about their experience in two weeks. You won't want to miss it! Make plans to be here! It will be an incredible worship experience, one that will invite you to change your attitude about what the young people of today can and will do to continue their faith journey! The youth gathered with about 5,000 of their closest friends and they yelled, shouted, made noise, lifted hands, PRAISED GOD!

At one point in Friday's service they had an altar call! I know, many of us struggle with this seemingly staged event designed to motivate people through the emotions of the moment. Here's the deal...it is in exactly the emotions of the moment that God reaches out to us. God can reach out to us as we sit on

our hands this morning, here, in this place. God is capable of moving your heart to love Him in this moment, and to change your life forever! God CAN do that! If God can do that here, in the calm of a Sunday morning while we all bear witness to the profession of faith made by new members of church, I have no doubt God can change the lives of several thousand teen-agers who have traveled hundreds of miles to hang out and have fun together in Branson!

In fact, God did do that! God spoke to these kids, God spoke to these adults and hundreds, maybe even thousands of them stood up and responded! They streamed back to a place where we who are pastors greeted them and encouraged them, and witnessed to them. I had a chance to share with three of them! I watched as the Word of God moved through them. I saw the look in their eyes! I felt the intensity of their commitment! I prayed with them and rejoiced as they prayed for themselves, for a new relationship...a new opportunity, a new life!

That is exactly what God is offering each of us this morning! A new life! Listen again to the words of Isaiah. "When you walk through Fire and Water, DO NOT BE AFRAID!" The Lord says, Do not be afraid because I AM with you. I am the one who created you! You are precious, and adored and I will let nothing happen to you. When God uses the words I AM to tell us about himself, our memories should be jolted! We should feel the skin on the nape of our neck begin to stand on edge! There should be a tingle through our entire bodies. Most of us do not know this! Most of us may not understand why we should feel alive at the sound of these words but if we just let the words speak to us, we will recognize in them something special. Perhaps later on, in our journey to God together, we will learn that these are the words God uses with Moses in Exodus 3. These are the words God uses to describe Godself. I Am!

Listen...before the world began, God says, "I Am!" There is never a time or place that God is not. We should feel alive because God has breathed that life into us and God wants us to know it. In Genesis 2, we find ourselves just lumps of clay. We have been formed and touched by God the creator, but as of yet, we have no life! Then around verse 7, God breathes into us! That breath is God's ruach, the Hebrew word for breath. This word is also the word for wind, or spirit! Watch what God does with that breath. He blows it into the person! He fills them with it. This life that is given is the very breath or spirit of God! From God, we receive our life and for God we are called to live it!

Does God want that life to be destroyed? Does God want that life to be harmed? The God of the universe had created life and God wants it to be lived! When you walk through fire and water, do not be afraid! I AM is with you! God walks with us each and every step of our way and in the difficult times, God carries us, God moves us, God lifts us up to new heights, to places we dare not go on our own! He who creates us desires to redeem us, to save us, to rejoice in us. We are precious in his sight!

Those young people who made their profession of faith that night in Branson understood this in that moment! They understood God's great love for them. In the midst of the chaos that was taking place around them, they heard God call them by name and claim them not just for that moment, but for all time! Above the roar of the crowd, above the bass and the guitar, above the miked up singers, God spoke to them! He spoke in a whisper and they heard!

Have you ever tried to communicate with someone in a large, loud crowd? Sometimes, a whisper is the only way to get that person's attention. You know how it works, you just lean over and whisper in their ear. The sound of the whisper somehow drowns out the noise of everything else going on around them! It becomes for them in that moment the single most important sound in the universe! It becomes a part of them! Your breath, breathed into them becomes a part of them! There is something special about that!

That whisper is exactly where God wants to meet you this morning! In Isaiah, the people to whom God is speaking are at the end of exile! They have been separated from God's presence because of their sin. They failed to recognize the call God has on their lives, they turned their backs on God and they paid a heavy price. In chapter 40 it says they paid for their sin, but now, God is going to give them back double for all their sin! God is going to reach out to them again! In Chapter 43, God whispers, "Do not be afraid!" Even though you have been near death, even though you will face incredible hardship, I am with you! Walk into the water! You will walk out! Walk into the fire! You will walk out! Not on your own, but with me by your side! I am with you! Do not be afraid!

God wants to overcome your fear! God wants to allow you to be at peace! Your task...our task is to let Him! The Gospel message this morning explains exactly how we can do that! Look carefully at how Luke sets it up for us. First, the people are filled with excitement and anticipation. There is something special going on at the river! All of Jerusalem and all the regions of the surrounding area are coming out. They are witnessing an incredible act! Not just the act of baptism, but the act of a person prophesying! John is telling them of the future they have with God! He is offering them a new opportunity...a new life! They feel the emotion of the moment! They want to respond!

The people who are walking in darkness have seen a great light! That light for them is a hope. They recognize the sin and stench of their lives! They want something else. God gives them John. John is like all prophets. He is a messenger! He is not God. His message is from God and it forth tells a future with God. The people, trapped in their fear want something more so they project their desires on John. One of the dangers of the altar call lies in exactly what happens to these people. The emotion of the moment often allows us to project what we want, what we need most onto the event of the moment. We hear the noise, the excitement, and we just cant resist! Salvation is in the moment! We don't want a forth teller, we want a fortune teller. We want the voice of the prophet to be our own voice! We

want to be able to dictate the terms of our salvation in the moment. We want it our own way and we want it now! In the moment!!

John however tells us salvation is not in the moment! His baptism, his altar call is only an invitation. Salvation is something more. John baptizes with water. What we need for salvation goes beyond repentance for our sins. Salvation comes from the whisper of what is next. Look at how Luke sets this up for us! It is easy to understand if we are paying attention. Luke lets John have his voice, have his day, be the prophet God calls him to be and then John steps off the stage. He baptizes for forgiveness of sins through repentance and then he leaves.

Herod takes care of his exit. Herod throws John into prison for speaking the truth. Understanding this is critical to understanding what we are receiving in Jesus baptism. When we are called by God to share the good news, there will be some who will not want to hear it. Many of these will simply turn their back and walk away! Some however will confront us, challenge us, even persecute us! The road we walk, the road Becca and Jeff joined us on this morning is a road that is narrow! It is a road that is steep. Last week, we learned about the spiritual cliff. Our road leads us up the spiritual cliff, now down toward death, but up and out to new life. The challenge, however is that there is danger with every step. John accepted that danger! His life invites us to the same kind of peril! John's baptism leads to forgiveness through repentance, Jesus baptism leads to sharing, suffering and sometimes to death as we are called to speak the truth. John suffered this fate! His fate is a reminder of the potential that exists for all of us in this world, but it invites us to move forward into possibilities beyond any we might imagine!

John steps off the stage! As he exits the scene is set for the one who holds the winnowing fork. In the text, His entrance is set up in silence! John is gone, but all the people have been baptized! Jesus also has been baptized. So...who baptized the people? Who baptized Jesus? This is a point that only Luke makes so it is easy to miss. In all the other gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, we see Jesus emerge from the water after being pushed down into it by John. We imagine our savior coming up with a splash, water dripping from him, head soaked, clothes clinging to his body and then suddenly a dove descends and fills Him with the power of the Holy Spirit!

Matthew's gospel even goes so far as to suggest that the voice that comes down from heaven is a booming voice heard by everyone! Luke does not portray the scene this way at all! All the people have been baptized, after being baptized, Jesus has withdrawn to pray! In his prayer time the heavens are opened, the spirit descends and a voice whispers You! You are my son, my beloved! With You I am well pleased!!

Who baptizes the people? Who baptizes Jesus? The answer is now, even as it was then! God baptizes. Salvation is not in the moment of emotional entanglement we might be caught up in according to the powerful and poetic words of the preacher! Salvation is more! Salvation is in the grace we receive from

God! God's unmerited favor is poured out on Jesus in our story this morning, but it is poured out on each of us as we are willing to receive it! This is God's gift! It comes in baptism and in prayer, but not from the people with the pretty words! It comes instead in God's whisper to us!

Pastors spend a great deal of time in formal training learning the words of baptism. The words are important in so far as they serve to educate us as to what is about to happen in the moment. Sometimes, however these words are over emphasized! Sometimes, we believe that it is the words of humans that brings salvation. It was and is essential for Luke to remind us that it is not within the power of human beings to offer salvation. This is God's mighty act and it is wonderful to behold. It is an incredible mystery and it deserves to be embraced!

Do not mis-understand, the words of the pastor, or who ever performs the baptism are extremely important. Baptism is not to be taken lightly and the person performing the act has an incredible responsibility to convey what is about to happen. The words however, are only words! The words can never replace the faith required to step forward and receive what God has to offer. When the pastor at Winter Extreme offered an invitation to the youth gathered there the words were very powerful, but they never could have been effective if they weren't filled with the power of the Holy Spirit!

People have often asked me if I think baptism is as effective for infants as it is for people who are older and able to answer for themselves the questions we ask as we prepare a person to receive this incredible sacrament. My answer is that to answer that question as phrased is to not understand at all what is happening in the act of baptism. Our response is not required in order for God's gift to be bestowed! We do not need to speak words or shout acclamations! We simply need to receive God's grace as it is poured out in this miraculous act!

Jesus does not have a speaking part in Luke's gospel portrayal of His baptism! He says nothing, yet he receives and is anointed and moves forward! Infants who are baptized allow all of us to understand that God's gift of life is just that. It is God's Gift! It is meant to be received, treasured, pondered in our hearts and shared! God's grace is God's alone to give and it is given to infants, young adults, and even to people on their death beds! It is not ours to question, only to accept. Those who choose to have their children baptized as infants have an awesome responsibility to teach this information to those kids. They must help their children to recognize that before they were born, God knew them! He called them by name and He loved them! I often wonder if this is the reason some do not choose to have their children baptized as infants...because they do not want that responsibility!

Having said that, it is appropriate for people to be baptized whenever God's grace is available! Whenever God's grace is available; and God's grace is always available! It was available to the people of Israel as they returned from exile. They were sinners who had turned their backs on God! They were

God's chosen who had chosen to reject God! Yet, in the fullness of time, God chose them again! He called them by name for they were his. Look at how God works this out:

V. 1—Jacob, Israel, I have made you, I have redeemed you. Do not be afraid

V. 7—Everyone, whom I have made I have called

V. 2—When you pass through fire and water, you will not be harmed!

V. 6—From the north and the south and the east and the west I will call you! I will bring you!

V. 3—I have paid a great price for you

V. 5—Do not fear, I am with you

V. 4—You are precious in my sight and I love you!

Notice the parallels in God's message from the prophet Isaiah. Verses 1 and 7 say the same thing but verse 7 expands it. Jacob and Israel are called first, then everyone is called! In verses 2 and 6 God reminds us not to be afraid. God promises to bring us back regardless of how far away we have wandered. In verses 3 and 5 God reminds us that he has paid a great price for us. He has given other people as a ransom for the Israelites, but he has paid an even greater price for us. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son." He gave Jesus, the one who was born to redeem us from our sins as an exchange, a ransom for us! Why did God do this? So that Isaiah could reveal verse 4. You are precious in my sight and I love you! God offers His grace not because of who we are but because of whose we are! We are His!

He shares this message with Jesus not as a booming proclamation from the clouds, but as a whisper. It is a *Whisper Heard Round the World! It is a whisper God wants to share with you this morning!* In the midst of all the chaos and the noise of our incredibly loud and busy lives, God wants to say to us, "You are my child, my beloved! With you I am well pleased! Receive my grace and my love and go from this place to share the good news with all you can for as long as you can!

God speaks these words to us as we pass through the fire, the light that has come into the world and darkness cannot overcome it! He also speaks it as we pass through the water. In the water, we remember our own baptism. We have the same responsibility to ourselves as we have to our children; to remind ourselves that once, God poured out His grace on us, that once God redeemed us, and that once God spoke to us saying, "you are my child, my beloved."

We come into contact with water several times through the course of our busy days. Perhaps, if you have not made a New Years resolution for this year you will consider this one. When you get into the shower in the morning and water covers you, remember God's gift of grace. When you wash your hands at meal times, remember God's grace. When you take a drink and you drink the water of life, remember God's gift of living water and remember the time when God whispered to you, "You are my child! With you I am well pleased!" Let this be the *Whisper Heard Round the World!* Amen!

Next Week: Scripture: Amos 5: 21-24. Message: *I Have a Dream!* This is the only sermon I ever repeat! I may preach from the same text more than once but **This Message** I offer every year as a reminder of our responsibility to others in our society who are less fortunate than we are! God does not want or need anything from us, but what does God require of us? How are we to be in relationship with God and other? Come and worship! Come and see!