

3Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Baptism of Jesus

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

Late at night during my college years, my roommate and I unraveled many of the world's great mysteries. Somewhere between Chimes and East State streets, we developed durable and important strategies for everything from managing the undersized frontcourts of Dale Brown's LSU basketball teams,² to solving those oldest questions of life: *Who am I? Why am I here? What does it all mean?* At some point in the deep evening or pre-dawn hours, our voices would raise and our Turbodog³ would splash as we shared existential enlightenment.

Of course, waking to the hum of the window unit [in what remains a favorite apartment],⁴ I would lie in bed and try to remember the answers: I could remember the questions; I could remember the conversation; I could even remember where we sat or stood when we "got it;" but I could never quite reassemble the logic. The solutions just would not fit together the way they had only hours before. Our brilliance, like an early morning fog, had melted into the ether.

Blowing steam off our cups of coffee at the breakfast table, we would lament to one another, "If only someone had recorded us. If only there had been a documentary film crew at The Bayou last night, civilization still might be saved" [to be clear: thanks be to God there was not] So, age-predictably if not altogether wisely, we sought to recover what we believed lost: we retraced our steps, sat in the very same booth, and placed the very same order ... yet even if we believed our brilliance had returned, those recovered inspirations proved equally ephemeral.

This morning's lesson begins with "the people" of Galilee also curious of life's mysteries – though listening at the edge of the Jordan rather than the edge of a Baton Rouge pool table. Gathered at the riverside, the Evangelist notes that the crowd, "filled with expectation," wonders whether John might be the messiah.⁵ We readers of Luke's Gospel know better, for we have been present with Zechariah when the angel foretold John's birth,⁶ and when John leapt within Elizabeth's womb upon the visit of her pregnant cousin, Mary.⁷ Therefore, while John has received nearly equal attention to this point in the text, there has been no confusion for us regarding his and Jesus' respective roles in the fulfillment of God's purposes: *John prepares the way for Jesus*, this one who will follow him, who will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire."⁸

The three verses omitted in our lectionary appointment narrate the arrest and imprisonment of John,⁹ a brief account the authoring community deploys to pull John into the background, and to move Jesus firmly and finally into the fore. The narrative then resumes as we heard: "Now when

all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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.’”¹⁰

Despite the sparkle of this event – some of those old questions receiving a remarkable and unexpected answer [“in bodily form,” no less] – the Evangelist does not tarry at the scene or in its idiosyncratic details. Following this morning’s appointment, Luke announces the formal launch of Jesus’ ministry. The authoring community matter-of-factly names, “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work ...”¹¹ and *off* goes the story.

Today, we and much of Christendom commemorate, “The Baptism of Our Lord.” This occasion follows the chronological progression through the Jesus story that we began in Advent with Gabriel’s visit to Mary; Mary’s pregnancy; Jesus’ birth; the Holy Family’s escape from Herod; the naming of Jesus in the Temple; and then, last week, the travels of the Magi. Our celebration each year on this *first* Sunday after the Epiphany inaugurates Jesus’ adult ministry and anticipates his and his disciples’ turn toward Jerusalem at the Transfiguration, which we commemorate on the *last* Sunday of this Epiphany season.

Our recollection of Jesus’ baptism realizes a special mode of liturgical remembrance. More than simply rereading an old story, we refer to this mode of remembering as *anamnesis*. Anamnesis comes from the Greek *ana*, meaning to repeat [as in *analogy*], and from the resonant root in *mimeograph*¹² [meaning to imitate]. Canadian theologian William Crockett explains, “to make [an anamnestic] memorial of an event is to ‘actualize’ it in the present ... this does not destroy [its uniqueness as] an historical event that took place once and for all in the past. [Rather,] To ‘actualize’ the past [in this way] opens new possibilities in the present.”¹³ That is, by our worshipful remembrance, we bring the past *into our present*, shaking loose the bindings of space and time to share in the eternity¹⁴ of that long-ago Gospel moment.

We practice anamnesis every Sunday in our celebration of the Eucharist. We tell the old story of Jesus’ supper with his friends, of course, but we do more than that, too; we remember that story *in our own voice*. We set this altar with tableware made by a glasssmith from just around the corner and with linens embroidered by members of this parish. We fill the stone and shimmer of our worship space with the memories of those many churches and church altars, dinner tables and diner booths, where we have gathered across all the seasons and suppers of our lives. And when we bring to these devotions the hopes and hurts of our lives, this altar rail lengthens, knocking down the apse’s walls and windows to stretch across all times and all places. Sharing in the eternity of the Eucharistic table, we stand and kneel with all those who have done the same before us and alongside us – we “‘actualize’ the past [in a way that] opens new possibilities in *our present*.”

Fortunately for any nostalgic delusions I might muster, the bar that incubated mine and my old roommate’s philosophies burned down some years ago [it wasn’t us],¹⁵ and it’s been replaced by

a fancy bakery that serves expensive cookies to undergraduates debauched enough to believe they can afford them. Therefore, the idea of me squeezing into my college clothes [and recall that concert t-shirts ran small in those days ...], meeting Rugger at one of those café tables, and sharing over-priced pastries, doesn't seem likely to fill civilization's ache. No, those events "took place once and for all in the past."

For the same reason, today when we memorialize Jesus' baptism, we do not stage a reenactment: we do not vest in period dress, speak in artificial accents, or behave as one Gospel character or another [and, as an aside, this is why I have an allergy to Palm Sunday productions tilting in that direction]. Of course, we delight when we honor the significance of Jesus baptism by baptizing or, like today, when we recall our own baptismal promises in the familiar dialogue we will soon share. Yet, these customs do not merely point to the past; instead, by these practices we invest deeply *in our present*. We dip a finger into the font as an act of anamnesis: recalling our baptism, *we pass through those holy waters again!* Making the sign of the cross, we hear once more the words of our God announced from a seat no lower than heaven itself: *You are my beloved – here. With you I am well pleased - now. I choose you – forever.*

See, the very quality that made those teenaged-days at The Bayou so precious *was their ephemeral nature*; the same is true of Jesus' baptism, and the same is true of this moment! Even our most treasured experiences necessarily melt into the ether. While the experience of letting them go often feels bittersweet – heart-achingly so – we best honor the holiness of *those* occasions, by honoring the holiness of *this* occasion, and the holiness of all those soon to come.

For this, we pray in the name of the God who holds us in common,
remembering and hoping with all people;
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² I think first, of course, of the 1994-95 squad with Clarence Caesar and Roman Rubchenko. Clarence remains an all-time favorite of mine – if he got hot, look out – though was more of a long 2 or a 3. Rubchenko had some skill at 6'8", or so, but was too short for the 4, and not athletic enough for the 3. The team had no true 5, which was a problem in those days. The great Randy Livingston, post-injury, was also on that team, with Ronnie Henderson at the 2. Henderson was a "volume shooter," as they call them now; he could shoot when he was open, but he struggled to create his own looks. I have grown fonder of Dale Brown in the years since his "retirement" in 1997, but this team underachieved.

³ The Abita brewery's first success, the Turbodog of old made Guinness look like Harp. The legal drinking age in Louisiana was still 18, and the \$5 pitchers with free pool at The Bayou from 5:00-7:00PM were a recipe for trouble more than enlightenment.

⁴ Such a great place: tall ceilings, wood floors, and walking distance to campus for \$181.50/month. While steeping a large pot of sweet tea late one morning, I returned to the kitchen to find a racoon had barreled through the screen door and claimed the space his own. On another day, a swarm of termites claimed the den, including my parents' old sofa. I've never seen anything quite like that scene; I ruined a vacuum cleaner sucking them up. And all this before the ceiling of the bathroom caved in, which the landlord was months delayed to repair. Like those LSU basketball teams, the place had character.

⁵ Luke 3:15.

⁶ Luke 1:5-25.

⁷ Luke 1:39-45.

⁸ Luke 3:16.

⁹ Luke 3:18-20.

¹⁰ Luke 3:21-22.

¹¹ Luke 3:23a.

¹² ... a term (and an aroma) known to those of a certain age.

¹³ Crockett, William. *Eucharist: Symbol Of Transformation*, Liturgical Press, 1989, p. 258. For at least two generations of Episcopal clergy, the blue spine of Crockett's book could always be found on a church office's bookshelf. Crockett died in 2018.

¹⁴ I guess I'm on a kick, or something; this idea resonates with [my Christmas Eve sermon](#).

¹⁵ A great (gross, dark, smoky) bar, someone had spray-painted "J. Mascis Is God" on its side.