

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism of our Lord

January 10th, 2010

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church.

Dearest brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tony Campolo is a professor emeritus at Eastern University. He was also on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania for ten years. Tony is an ordained Baptist pastor, author, and international speaker.

His wife, Peggy, is described by Tony as a brilliant woman who also has a Ph.D. Yet, she elected to stay home when their two children were born. Her decision didn't bother her at all except when people would ask, "What do you do?"

She would answer, "I'm a homemaker. I stay home and take care of our children and my husband."

They would usually respond 'Oh' and ignore her from then on.

So, her and Tony came up with this new response when she was asked what she did.

"What do you do?"

"I'm socializing two homosapiens in Judeo-Christian values so they'll appropriate the eschatological values of utopia. What do you do?"

They would blurt out a simple response and wonder off with a dazed look in their eyes.

It is a regular occurrence and a fact of life in that certain titles and names bring with them certain recognitions. They carry a meaning far beyond their few syllables. This association leads us to easily recognize, associate, and remember various elements of life.

We only need to say a few names or titles and we instantly venture forth in casting our viewpoints.

Consider the following...Tiger Woods; Oprah...she's so great she doesn't even have a last name; how about the Mayo Clinic; and for the kids...Lightning McQueen or American Girl dolls.

Identity is shaped by those factors that are either constant over time or so grand that it's imperative they be included in our recognition. Elements from our beliefs, appearance, habits and family shape who we are as individuals.

In the gospel reading today describing Jesus' baptism and the presence of John the Baptist, we encounter a piece of scripture where identity is paramount.

Identity as a reflection of passion, dedication, and source of growth in our lives of faith.

Comparisons abound in all that we do. A new leader or coach takes over and their always compared to their predecessor. Kids compare their Christmas gifts. Marketing is based on the assumption that a given product will make your life far better compared to where it is

now. Comparisons are made to determine a person's position to that of someone else. Comparisons are a key guiding factor in how we live, parent, work, and play.

It is only the writer of the gospel of Luke who insists on comparing John the Baptist to Jesus. There seems to be a sense of ambivalence toward John based on the qualifying descriptors used to describe him.

John the Baptist is offspring of a miraculous conception-his parents are very old.

Yet, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Mary, Jesus' mother, goes to pay her respect to John's mother Elizabeth.

Yet, as she does so, Elizabeth breaks into singing and praises Mary.

John baptizes multitudes.

Yet, he declares himself unworthy to baptize Jesus.

John is an integral part of the story while he is continually trumped by Jesus. Luke is saying, "Sure, he is great...but ..."

If there was a small amount of ambivalence on the part of the Gospel of Luke, there was not any ambivalence on the part of the crowds who went to be near John. To venture from their homes, out into the wilderness to be baptized by him and thereby seize a new direction in daily living.

What led them to go out to a crazy-haired, camel-skin wearing, locust eating man preaching about sin, repentance, and change?

The identity that John had which led the multitudes to be near him...was his passion. We see such passions in great leaders such as Bill Hybels at Willow Creek Church relative to church leadership and ministry and Michael Jordan in basketball. It is passion that leads others to be captivated by a person's presence, actions, and goals.

John's passion for the powerful and convicting message of God's judgment and goodness led others to heed his words. It shaped who we was while opening the door of God's present into the lives of others.

The key thing about passion as it guides our lives is that those things which we are passionate about originated some time in the past. Experiences from yesterday shape our decisions and actions today. English actor Richard Grant once wrote, "Committing yourself is a way of finding out who you are. A man finds his identity by identifying."

In looking at the past, we can easily identify those passions that are healthy and those that are unhealthy. Those that nurture our faith, our relationships and God's kingdom in this world.

And those that mark those times where we have fallen short in the temptation of anger, lust, greed, selfishness or pride. Fallen short in nurturing our faith by keeping God at a higher position on our priority scale rather than as a comfortable commodity.

It is those times where we have sinned, “fallen short of God’s glory” in the word’s of the apostle Paul, that lead us to focus on our goodness rather than our failings. It is a challenge to call a spade a spade, so to speak, to come to terms with the hurt we have caused, to ourselves and to others, in order to seize the goodness of God’s forgiveness.

Those who flocked to John brought their past with them to witness a deep-seeded passion that guided John’s life. A passion that addressed the past with a confidence rooted in the goodness of God. It was a passion of powerful conviction of the past mixed with the joyful excitement of a new beginning.

It was that passion that they yearned to be near in hopes of receiving a renewed sense of God’s presence as a means to address their past for a brighter future.

It wasn’t the messenger but the passionate message that led many back to God.

We are there as well. We come to God with our foibles and shortcomings as adults, spouses, parents, friends, co-workers, children of God. We may also come to God with concerns for a loved one or a friend.

We come, for forgiveness...given to us by God’s grace.

Given to us...to make new again...and to re-kindle our passion of faith.

I continue to marvel at the elements of dedication that rest on various fronts of our daily lives. Everywhere we look, there are high expectations brought upon parents who want their children involved in given programs and teenage athletes are playing their sports year round in hopes of attaining more playing time during the season. Expectations where a person can’t miss any practices, rehearsals, classes or whatever.

Our dedications shape our relationships. Unlike passion, dedication requires a continuous, daily commitment to the task at hand. This commitment can be extreme for immediate gain while other, long-lasting commitments suffer. For example, long work hours for immediate approval lead to time away from home and suffering family life. Long hours of practice on the field lead to suffering grades in the classroom.

From John, we gain a glimpse of God-guided dedication. This dedication is a deliberate and consistent decision to nurturing your relationship with God.

Today, we may not go off, withdraw from our daily responsibilities to go and preach like John. Yet, we can daily withdraw and dedicate ourselves to God by **daily prayers**. You don’t need to prayer long prayer or worry about what words to say. But, simply taking time to open your heart to talk to God. One of my seminary professors always began his prayers not with, ‘Oh good, all-gracious God’ but by simply saying, “Good morning, Lord.”

Prayer opens us to the presence of the divine while nurturing our faith based by choosing to be in God’s presence amid all the expectations in a day. Withdrawing from the pace of life brings strength and renewed focus in living.

Our faith is nurtured by the passion of addressing our past eager for the joy of change

in God's forgiveness; dedication to daily nurturing our faith; and finally, a new beginning offered by God each day, each moment of our daily life.

The zhu zhu hamster toys were the sought-after Christmas toy this past season. Why? It was something new compared to previous toys. They only cost \$8 but were sold out by early December leaving people angry and frustrated.

Life is marked by the daily pursuit of something new, the next best thing. Investors continually seek out insights into the next big product hitting the market. Scouts are looking for the newest talent coming out of colleges and high schools. We enjoy changing up our homes once in a while to seize a new reality to that of before.

John was offering something new in his message to those then and to us today. It is a message of hopeful beginning grounded in God's faithfulness to us. It was that faithfulness that washed over us in the waters of baptism. A new life lived under the love of God where God says, to adults, children and innocent, dependent babies, "I love you, you are mine."

New words not based on our accomplishments.

Not based on our failings.

Not based on our family name or relationships.

New words given to us each day inviting us to seize God's forgiveness and love shown to us in Christ's death and resurrection.

Newness is appealing for each of us since in it there is hope marked with great possibilities. Possibilities for you as an individual, for your marriage, your family, your friendships.

This week, I invite you to seize this newness each day. Remind yourself of your baptism as you wash your hands or as you bathe.

Do something new to nurture your marriage...write a small post it note of caring words to your spouse; compliment your children more; say a kind word to a co-worker.

All new possibilities shine God's light into a world where we are accustomed to the normative pace of life.

It is in realizing the passion of John the Baptist and from what is gathered among us; in daily dedicating ourselves to God in prayer; and seizing God's new message by doing something new and uplifting for another...that our faith is nurtured, our relationships are strengthened, and others experience God's goodness.

Amen.