

Power Pointed
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2008
Matthew 3:13-17

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Dear Friends:

Christmas has come and gone for another year. It never ceases to surprise me how after weeks of intense preparation and anticipation for the holiday, we are so quick to move on. Thanks to the retail industry, since December 26 we've been seeing signs of Valentine's Day, Easter, even spring and summer goods in stores.

While Christmas is over there is another season we are entering. Can you guess what it is? Presidential primary season. Here we are hip deep in another presidential campaign. Earlier than ever before, this campaign has captured the attention of this country and will hold us captive for another 10 months.

In actuality, presidential primary season began long ago. And typically it starts with the ritual announcement ceremony.

Most campaigns for office begin with some kind of formal announcement event and they follow a kind of standard order. Bands play, flags are waved, a crowd of family and friends are gathered to cheer in front of the cameras. But one other thing is most important in these announcements. There is almost always a calculated, sometimes dramatic or symbolic setting chosen at which the announcement takes place. Very often, it's the setting for the announcement that says more than anything the candidate has to say in the speech.

Looking back on the announcements of past presidential candidates, we see many different settings. In a gesture that speaks volumes, Jimmy Carter launched his 1976 presidential campaign from the front porch of Franklin Roosevelt's summer home in Warm Springs, Georgia. To garner the support of moderate Republicans, Ronald Reagan announced his 1980 run for the presidency not from his conservative base in California or even his home town in Illinois, but in the Grand Ball Room of the New York Hilton.

In the current campaign, Mitt Romney announced his candidacy in Detroit, standing in the Henry Ford museum saying: "It is time for innovation and transformation in Washington."

Almost always, the serious candidates will pick the place for their announcement ceremonies with an eye toward building themselves up. All this is done so they can get to the steps of the Capitol building, where they hope one day to be inaugurated to the nation's highest office.

If there's anything in the Bible even close to the kick-off of a presidential campaign it's in the story of Jesus' baptism read today. It has some of the same flavor and drama of a presidential campaign announcement, except in this case the office in question is even higher than the presidency.

The Bible story tells us that Jesus is baptized, in a wilderness river setting, with a dramatic announcement from God. The voice of God coming from heaven announces Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Can you imagine how shocking that was? A voice from heaven. Surely this announcement had more drama than the presidential candidates announcing who they are and what they want to

be! And the setting -- rather strange. Out in the wilderness! Wouldn't you choose some spectacular place to announce Jesus as the Son of God? The people of Jesus' own day looked for the Messiah to be revealed and announced in the Temple, or at the very least, in Jerusalem which was the central holy city.

Think about how presidential candidates announce themselves and how our country makes known a new president. We inaugurate our president with great fanfare on the Capitol steps, a very powerful place in the world. There are dignitaries and elected leaders and the power people seated close to the action. All this takes place after weeks of preparation and is followed by days of celebrating. In the same way we inaugurate the president, the Jews of Jesus' day expected the Messiah to be announced in some grand, glorious event complete with all the pomp and circumstance that the Temple could accommodate.

But as I read it in the Bible, there isn't any of that ceremony when God announces Jesus as his Son. There isn't any band, there are no speeches, no parties or press coverage. Instead, God reveals his Son, the Messiah, not from any holy or powerful place -- but far out in the wilderness in a river valley. And what's more, the event takes place without a crowd of invited dignitaries, educated leaders or respected religious officials. And even further, the one who oversees this event is not a king or priest or respected society official but rather an outsider named John who is far from the mainstream of society. Without a doubt, the baptism of Jesus is the occasion God chose to announce to the world the long awaited Messiah.

Shocking? You bet! Surprising -- I think so. And I like it. God had pulled another fast one the people in power again. God has completely blown out of the water the expectations of the official religious crowd. But what's even more peculiar about this event in Jesus' life is not just the setting in which his baptism takes place. We know that politicians will often choose odd or strange settings for their announcements. Sometimes unusual settings are chosen in order to get press attention. Other times candidates will seek out a different kind of spot in order to win support of voters who might not otherwise vote for them. When John Edward announced his bid from New Orleans and its lower Ninth ward which is still recovering from Hurricane Katrina in a clear appeal to voters who care about the ordinary people who have basic needs. We might think then, that Jesus is following a similar strategy by choosing a very ordinary place to be announced as God's Son. Rather than go to the Temple for the big announcement, we could reason that Jesus is appealing to the crowds of ordinary people gathered at the river bank. That's a good theory, except that no one seems to hear the words of God from heaven. Not even the guy who baptized him, -- because as you continue reading the story of Jesus in the Bible, no one seems to have grasped that Jesus is the Messiah! In our day, a politician would use such an announcement event to build support and broaden the power base. The same way we look for a president who will project power and confidence in our country, the Jews looked for a Messiah who would bring power and inject terror into their enemies. But Jesus didn't come displaying power. This Messiah does not strike up the band, wave the banners and alert the press. This Messiah comes in secret, hidden in the crowds, unnoticed in the countryside.

Why? Because this Messiah is the servant -- the very one in whom God invests divine power. He does not shout or make loud speeches in front of crowds, rather Jesus is gentle, quiet, and unassuming.

Muhammad Ali, when he was Cassius Clay was a little brash, a little arrogant. He was on an airplane one day and over the intercom the pilot announced that they were entering some turbulence. The pilot politely asked all passengers to buckle their seat belts. All the passengers complied, except Cassius Clay. He didn't buckle his belt. The flight attendant did the ritual run up and down the aisle checking each passenger. When she came to Cassius Clay, she noticed his belt wasn't buckled. "Please, sir, buckle your seat belt" she asked. He replied, "Superman don't need no seat belt." In a quick response, the flight attendance replied, "Superman don't need no plane either. Put on your belt!"

Someone once said that the ultimate turn-on is power. And without question, power is intoxicating stuff. We like to have power. But if there's any one area where Jesus is most unlike us, it's in the way he carries the power of God. Where we so often lust for power, seek power, and always, always want more, Jesus points his power to the service of others. He does not seek for himself. He does not exalt himself or call attention to himself. But instead, Jesus is the suffering servant who walks in silence and throughout his ministry swears to secrecy all who get a glimpse of his power.

As a nation, as a church, and as individuals, we are all subject to the lure of power. Sometime we even expect God to bring power to bear as we choose and desire. We're not so different from the people of Jesus' day who looked for God's Son parading down the halls of power. But the God we know uses power far differently.

How do I know that? Well, I just have to look at the cross that Christian churches so prominently display inside and out. The cross is a sign of God's power -- but before it was even seen in the front of a church or on top of a steeple, it was seen on the back of a man who was ridiculed, scorned, rejected and killed. And that says something very important about power and its role in our lives.

If you want to be powerful, don't look at your net worth, or your diplomas framed on the wall, or your house, or your well-known, successful friends. If you want to be powerful, then follow Jesus and serve in the ways that Jesus served.

I know it's not easy. The world is always luring us towards grand and seductive things. But you know the ways of Christ who shines the light of a different power. May you know that power of God in the days of this coming week -- as you give of yourself, as you help others and serve in Christ's love and share the Good News. Amen.