

January 10, 2010
The First Sunday after Epiphany; The Baptism of Jesus
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8: 14-17, 25

Even in Samaria

It would be wonderful – I think - to have people anticipate this season after Epiphany with the towering expectations they bring to Christmas! 'Darling, we can't possibly go skiing all weekend. It's the first Sunday after Epiphany.'

But reality hits. Theologian John Westerhoff points out that at Christmas we celebrate God's coming to us; in the season after Epiphany, we celebrate our going to God.ⁱ Maybe that's a harder sell. At Christmas, we begin a long journey to discover what the life of one laid in a manger means for us, a journey that takes us through surprising places, draws us into the mystery of God's being: flickers the light from the stable door, and all those Christmas Eve candles, into cold January nights.

Still, we know little about Jesus in the early years. Then Jesus comes to be baptized, and, as our concluding hymn will remind us, leaves the hidden years behind. What do we learn now, on this Sunday when we remember Jesus' baptism?

Jesus went to the Jordan River to begin his ministry. What prompted him to move towards the uncertainty ahead?

Why go to the Jordan - a good question to ask ourselves on a frosty Sunday morning. What brings you out of bed and through the cold? Why gather in worship? It is a question with many answers: the nurture of parents, tradition, the hunger of our hearts. Is it love for the world or deep dissatisfaction with it? The answers come: 'I don't know - but I'm hungry for something, for meaning.' Or 'I want a church with good music' or 'a place with lots of activities for children.' People come looking for peace, for stimulation, for nourishment, for challenge, for insight, for reassurance, for spiritual experience, prayer, friendship. For whatever reason, let us remember that the spirit of God is always at work - in all of this, all the time.

Jesus came to the Jordan's bank, with others, where John was asking people to confess and repent before being baptized. "Why?" some ask. Surely Jesus did not need to confess and repent? No. But perhaps he is showing his full connection with all whose lives are moving towards something special - moving towards God. Baptism offers identification. Here is Jesus, identifying himself with those who know there is more in life, opening himself to a deeper sense of joy and community, however spiritually alive he was, expressing the deep yearning in his heart, publicly declaring reliance on God.

Why go to the Jordan? What are you looking for? Some answers I've heard: 'I'm looking for healing for the pain I feel'; 'I'm looking for forgiveness to free me from the pain I've caused'; 'I'm looking for strength to break my addiction'; 'I'm looking for others to share in making a better world'; 'I'm looking for hope.' I'm looking for.... How would you answer? What would fill your

deepest need?

Who are we? We are partners, friends, strangers, parents, children, teachers, students, overworked, underemployed, successful and fearful and flawed. But the story of Jesus' baptism reminds us that to be among the baptized means that we are those named by God, called to seek and proclaim God's presence in a cold and suffering world. From that spiritual identity grows everything else. Knowing it, we do things that tell the world who we are: things like sing God's praise and feed the hungry, celebrate God's presence and heal the broken-hearted, work for justice, peace, the healing of creation.

Identity is important. That's why, community centres such as the one in the Davenport Perth Neighbourhood and others serving the homeless and poor, street kids, former psychiatric patients, (centres funded generously by The United Church and congregations like this one), in addition to outreach during cold times like these also ask volunteers to help those with no form of identification to apply for such essential documents as health cards. Without one, street people may lose out on essential medical care. Identity is important.

Who are we? Our identity as God's named people tells us that we are those who, when we can, stand with others whose identity is less certain.

And who is God? Do you remember that story from Acts?

When native people heard that the Federal Government had accepted their call for an apology and for healing....

When - you fill it in - a friend of yours heard that the person she most feared or despised had sent her a gift, and a statement of sorrow and reconciliation...

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the Word of God...

It's easy to miss the stunning surprise, the transformation of heart and mind, in those words. For anyone in Jerusalem to believe for a moment, even to care, that the word of God had appeared in Samaria, much less been accepted there, would once have been unthinkable. By all traditions, all prejudices by which the apostles had been raised, Samaria was beyond the pale, beyond consideration, beyond God's loving acceptance.

Hostility between Jews and Samaritans was historic, deep-rooted. Jesus knew that and worked against it, speaking to the Samaritan woman, praising the faith of a Samaritan leper, putting together an impossible – for his hearers – combinations of words in his portrayal of a Samaritan as 'Good'. Jesus knew that God's epiphany means that something new and surprising was happening, even in Samaria.

In fact, the ministry in Samaria, according to *Acts*, is Christianity's first venture outside the local precincts of Jerusalem, an indication of vast changes already taking place within apostles touched by what they had experienced in their relationship with Jesus.

Some people look for control or power, rather than the miracle of love. In the season after Epiphany, we see God revealed in the light of the stable door, as suffering, caring love, telling us

not to fear, calling us by name, even through the ice storms of our living, even in Samaria.

Who are Samaritans? Children living in poverty? Native street people, the homeless and rejected, psychiatric patients set adrift? Refugees? A woman drowning in alcohol and depression? Muslim neighbours seeking acceptance? All of these can too easily seem to be 'samaria', a place or person irrelevant to faith, in some way outside the Word of God. Are we prepared to recognise them as recipients of the Holy Spirit? And like the apostles, can we lay hands on our Samaritans – or offer them our hands, our caring, our assistance. Deep in our hearts, I think, we know we are called by God to try... For, until with God's help, we do reach out to others, we will not experience through them the full presence of the Holy Spirit for ourselves.

Who is God? One who comes, even in Samaria, perhaps first in Samaria...

Who are we? Those who lay hands on, shake hands with, Samaritans.

"Impossible, utterly impossible!" we may say.

Epiphany tells us that ours is a God of surprises and impossibilities, greater than our imagining. God's grace invites us into unforeseen places, to nurture the world and care for others.

What is the equivalent of baptism for Samaritans, for us?

God's love is inviting us to enter into the delight at the core of creation, to find the strength and courage to nurture the world and care for others, to resist injustice and struggle for the good, to love deeply. When you know that, you, too, can come to the Jordan, be taken up into the embrace of God. Reaching out because deep in our hearts there is a common vision, a sacred message: justice and peace: God reminding us, telling Creation that we are one.

Now that the songs of Christmas are stilled, the visitors have gone home, the decorations been put away, the real work of Christmas begins. It begins where Jesus' work began: in the waters of baptism, the coming of the Holy Spirit. There is much to be done as baptised children of our God, even, especially, in Samaria. As the folks who brought the world Christmas, let's get on with it. Amen.

Lillian Perigoe

i. John Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*