

## God's Beloved

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Luke 3: 15-22

January 13, 2013

I hope you noticed our host church's marquee as you came in tonight: "Baptism of Jesus, 10:30 a.m." If only we had known...I'm afraid tonight is going to be anticlimactic.

So, the worst New Year's Eve I've ever experienced was in 2006. I had just finished facilitating a retreat in Michigan and was heading to Davidson, North Carolina, for a celebration with my sister, brother-in-law, nephews, and niece. It was late afternoon in the Detroit airport, and reports were being issued from the airline podium about heavy fog in Charlotte, then problems with our plane's auto-pilot mechanism.

Airline agents sent us from gate A6 to A41. We made the long trek, dragging our carry-on luggage with our three-ounce containers of shampoo and toothpaste, expecting to find a plane there—but instead encountered a three-hour line as each of us was rebooked on other flights. Mine was scheduled to leave at 6:30 the following morning.

A friend came and rescued me and took me back to Day House, Detroit's Catholic Worker house. Sleep was impossible, as neighbors in that part of Detroit ushered in the New Year by shooting off guns half the night, and I had to be up long before dawn to catch my early-morning flight. Picture 5 a.m. on New Year's Day at the Detroit airport, a planeload of people mad that their New Year's Eve plans had been ruined, exhausted and hung-over adults, cranky and crying children, a family of Green Bay Packers fans wearing gigantic wedges of cheese on their heads, and a plane blocking our destination gate in Charlotte... It wasn't pretty.

So I kept my spirits up by remembering my favorite New Year's Eve. That would have been 2002. I was leading a peace retreat at Holden Village in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state. It's not the kind of place you just drop in on. I had to fly across the country to Seattle, drive three hours over two mountain passes, take a two-hour ferry ride up a lake, and be carried up the side of a mountain on a bus specially equipped with chains for deep snow.

Holden Village, once a copper mine and now a retreat center, holds that spectacular, breathtaking beauty that comes from deep, ice-blue lakes and rugged, towering peaks. It averages 270 inches of snow every winter. Our orientation to the place was devoted largely to advisories about how to avoid getting trapped in avalanches, and what to do if we encountered cougars on the trails—look big, in the latter instance. On the way in, from our safe seats aboard the bus, we saw a mother cougar and her two kittens.

New Year's Eve is a special time at Holden. Early in the day, a few brave souls went out in snowshoes to find and stomp out the labyrinth a mile from the village. At 10 that night, the rest of us made the trek, some with skis, others with snowshoes, many of us wearing the largest boots we could find or borrow. Tall candles stuck into snow banks lit our path. The stars were brilliant and beyond counting. Orion, perched low in the sky, appeared to be skiing down the side of Bonanza Mountain.

On the way to the labyrinth, we'd take 20, maybe 30 steps, staying on the surface of things. And then we'd hit a soft spot and fall into snow up to our waists. We'd pull ourselves, or each other, out, and carry on, one step at a time. Kind of like life.

As midnight approached, we all gathered around a massive tower of logs. A match was lit, and the pile turned into an inferno of heat and light—heat so intense we had to step back from it, light so bright we could see the faces of everyone around the circle. Drummers accompanied our ritual, beating out an ancient, primal rhythm that bounced off the mountain peaks standing like silent sentries around us.

Just before midnight, we were each invited to pick up a stick from one of the small piles before us, ponder something we needed to let go of from 2002, and heave the stick onto the bonfire. I thought hard about what I needed to release. My impatience? My grief? (2002 was a year in which I lost my father and seven friends). My perfectionism? My harsh judgments of people, especially the ones who drive below the speed limit in the left lane? It was a good way to take an accounting of the year and my own progress on the journey of faith.

When we had all stepped forward and taken a turn, a basket was passed around. Inside, on cards, were written words—one word per card. We had to choose blindly—and hope for the best. The word we each received, representing a Christian attitude or practice, was to be our challenge for the new year. Mine was “flexibility.” Hmmmm. We were exhorted to embrace the word throughout the coming months, allow it to shape 2003.

Letting go and embracing. The rhythm of life.

My otherwise disastrous New Year’s Eve in Detroit in 2006 was redeemed by a ritual, held annually, at Day House. Everyone who had gathered that night—residents, long-term volunteers, folks from the streets, and assorted friends—all were invited to share the highlight—and “lowlight”—of their previous year. Deep sharings, lots of laughs, and more than a few tears.

I’ve tried to keep that ritual on my own in the years since. The turning of a new year seems like a particularly good time to look back and reflect on the joys and sorrows, the challenges and thanksgivings, the losses and blessings of the year before. And to ponder hopes for the year that lies ahead.

I’m always glad that the baptism of Jesus appears in our lectionary on the second Sunday of the year. It seems right to me that we should begin each year with a reminder that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world. And that She proclaims over each of us, as She did over Jesus: “You are my child, the Beloved. With you I am delighted.” In the confidence of that reassurance of love, we can step into another year. We can release what needs to be released, and embrace what needs to be embraced.

One of the things that gives me hope for 2013 is that two of our young adults have expressed interest in being baptized. This Circle has done several infant dedications, but only one baptism. That was Simon Semper’s, in September 2011, when he was a couple months old. It was a beautiful, poignant, and sacred moment in our life together.

Our celebration of a Circle baptism feels similar to our sharing of the bread and cup each Sunday. Our various traditions view it as Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass, Agape Meal, Lord’s Supper. Whatever we call it—and whether or not we hail from a tradition labeled “sacramental”—we all know that this ritual is a “sacrament” in the deepest sense—a consecrated, holy, sacred moment.

One of the great gifts and joys to me of Circle of Mercy is that we can approach the table each Sunday from the diversity of our traditions and come together in the holiness of the moment. And I look forward to our doing the same with more baptisms—whether we come from a tradition that celebrates infant baptism, or believers baptism—or, in the case of Circle of Mercy, both.

So let me use this moment to remind us all, and offer an invitation, to our February 9 Lenten Retreat Day. The idea for our theme this year came from Missy Harris’s Ordination Committee, which is made up of Theresa Aeschliman, Larry Wilson, and myself—two Mennonites and a member of the United Church of Christ sharing pastoral insights and asking theological questions of a Baptist. We thought we ought to let all of you in on the fun.

So we’ll make space on February 9 to hear faith stories from one another, to share about the traditions from which we’ve come and those we embrace now. I’m looking forward to a rich day of listening, learning, and deepening our connections. And I hope you’ll be there.

A brief word about the history of baptism. The ritual has Jewish roots, which we know from tonight's scripture. Jews from all over Judea were going to John in the wilderness, asking to be baptized in the Jordan River. The message of John in response was "repent": turn from your sins and failings, steer your life in a new direction.

Then, as now, baptism was viewed as a disruption, a death and resurrection, a shifting of loyalties from the ways of the world to the ways of God. It included letting go of the old and embracing God's grace and mercy.

***Baptism is a disruption, a death and resurrection,***

***a shifting of loyalties from the ways of the world to the ways of God***

And, lest we think this is easy or popular, remember that John was imprisoned for calling Herod to account for his sin—for "all the evil things he had done," according to Luke. John was persecuted, and eventually beheaded, for inviting the ruler—yes, even Herod—into repentance and new life.

Baptism used to be a bit more rigorous and dramatic than what is usually experienced today. In the third century, the time of preparation and instruction preceding baptism lasted three years. This was followed by a time of examination, during which converts had to exhibit their understanding of Christian doctrines and demonstrate their faith convictions.

Baptism usually took place once a year, on Easter Sunday. It was customary for those being baptized to fast on Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The candidates entered naked into the baptismal water early Sunday morning.

Upon emerging, they were anointed and given white robes, as a sign of their new life in Christ; water to drink, signifying their cleansing inside and out; and milk and honey, as a symbol of the Promised Land they were entering. A death had taken place—a letting go of the old life. And a rebirth had come about—an embracing of a new way to live.

In 1997 I was in the Holy Land with a group of seminarians. We saw the usual sites—each one introduced with a word about whether this was the actual place where Jesus had been born, or delivered the Sermon on the Mount, or divided the loaves and fishes—or whether this was just someone's best guess as to where it might have happened. Only one place was given a different introduction: the site of Jesus' baptism. Standing on the bank of the Jordan River, we were told quite clearly that Jesus had *not* been baptized at this spot. We were standing there because the place where Jesus had been baptized now lay in a so-called "no-man's land," a space between enemy nations caught up in the Middle East wars—a place where no one is allowed to go.

One of the early baptismal formulas of the church was Galatians 3:28—"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Baptism is initiation into a community of equals under the mercy of Christ, who invites us all to reconciliation. Two thousand years later, we still need that message of repentance and peace.

Letting go and embracing. Letting go of our selfish comfort and our fears. Embracing our common humanity. Rededicating ourselves once more to claiming the Belovedness of God in ourselves—and to

acknowledging it in everyone we meet. May this be our prayer—may this be our hope—for 2013.

Amen.