

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**January 10, 2010**  
**Luke 3:15-22**  
**“Stepping Out from a Crowd”**

Luke only uses two verses to describe the baptism of Jesus. And it ends with the familiar line, “A voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” If I were to keep reading in Luke’s gospel, I would next read a fifteen-verse genealogy of all of Jesus’ descendants – a list of 77 names describing how Jesus was the son of Joseph, son of David, son of Abraham, son of Noah, and ending with the phrase “son of Adam, son of God.” In those last few words we are reminded that Jesus’ entire life was spent straddling two worlds – one whose will and being were intimately aligned with God, and yet one whose experiences were lived out amid the tragic structures of this world. Jesus – child of Adam, child of God.

When I re-read this passage from Luke, do you know what was the dominant image that came to my mind? It wasn’t the image of John the Baptist preaching about the coming Messiah. And it wasn’t the image of the heavens opening and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus. It was the image of the crowd of people who were gathered around John the Baptist, in whose midst Jesus stood and mingled; and when it was his turn, out of whose midst he stepped to be baptized by John. No special ceremony for Jesus. No Express Lane or EZ Pass or V.I.P. service for Jesus. He was one in the midst of other sons and daughters of Adam, sons and daughters of God, waiting his turn to be washed in the Jordan River.

Think about the crowd that gathered around John the Baptist. Some were curious; some were skeptical. But at some point individuals stepped out from the crowd, perhaps stepped out from their friends and family, and walked forward to be baptized by this Jewish wilderness preacher. Judaism already had a long tradition of ceremonial washings, or *miqveh*. John’s baptism built upon that tradition but included something more. It not only represented an act of cleansing and washing away impurity and sin; it also symbolized the act of being brought into a new community actively seeking oneness with God and justice for God’s people.

So there they were: women and men battered by the “wear and tear” of the world, struggling or oppressed or afraid or stubbornly hopeful or all the above, lined up to be baptized by John. And in their midst stood Jesus. Think of the lines in your life: waiting for a bank teller, waiting in a grocery store check-out line, sitting in a doctor or dentist’s waiting room, idling in line at a traffic light, waiting your turn to vote, waiting your chance to comfort a family at a funeral. Imagine Jesus also in that same line – ahead of you, or behind you; likely not even recognized by you but there all the same. How does that change how you think about that act of waiting? Jesus as Immanuel, “God with us” is not just a phrase for Christmas cards. Try to keep that in mind during the coming days.

I don’t know if I’ve already confessed this to you, but when our children were small, there were times when we told them a lie. We lived in a corner house in Racine,

Wisconsin, in a part of town where there were lots of smaller homes and families with kids. Which meant that in the spring and summertime, there were lots of ice cream trucks that drove up and down our street – slow-moving, mini-trucks blaring out endless loops of “The Entertainer” or “Turkey in the Straw.” We didn’t want our kids rushing out into the street, nor did we want to buy a popsicle six times a day, so we occasionally lied to our children. We told them that those were “music trucks” that drove around the neighborhood playing music for everyone. This worked well until the day Ian came running in the door and said, “Hey, did you know that the music trucks sell ice cream?”

Which now leads me to my next topic: original sin. Through scripture and church tradition we profess that all human life is tainted by sin. The myths and sagas of Genesis link this universal sin with the original act of disobedience of Adam and Eve back in the Garden of Eden – hence original sin. Later, a flawed combination of biology and theology taught that Adam’s sin was passed down from generation to generation largely through sexual activity and procreation. Suddenly the institution of the church felt it necessary to expend tremendous amounts of energy on the topics of intimacy, celibacy, and sexual relations. This has created a church far too anxious to persecute homosexuality while turning a blind eye to heterosexual promiscuity, instead of creating a church strongly committed to the real biblical priorities of justice and righteousness.

The problem is this: To understand original sin, you don’t need to explain it in terms of where it started and how it got up to us; you need to move in the other direction and recognize that evil presupposes itself. Or as Kierkegaard said, “sin posits itself.”<sup>1</sup> Every choice we make is made within a context that precedes it and shapes it. And much of that context is sinful, distorted and flawed. We do not exist in historical vacuums. We stand upon the ruins of past generations. We build upon the legacies of our predecessors. We too have genealogies – personal genealogies of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and historical genealogies of war, slavery, homicide, holocausts, famine, fighting, and sin. Original sin is the faith doctrine that dares to remind us that life will never make sense unless we acknowledge our broken past and sins going back to the origins of our life.

Time does not allow me to list all the ways original sin shapes our world today, but frankly the newspapers are full of examples. You may have read recently how a Slovakian police chief stupidly put plastic explosives in an unsuspecting airline passenger’s luggage, as a way to test airport security measures, out of the lingering fear that other terrorists want to blow up planes in western countries, due to reasons of political oppression and religious tensions that go back for centuries. Or Congress struggles to pass some form of health care reform before this year’s elections in which Democrats will likely lose their filibuster-proof majority, so compromises are made that weaken the bill and appear to cave in to special interests, which links back to the flaws of the campaign financing system and goes further back to struggles in any democracy between balancing states’ interests and working for the national good. There are no

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, p. 166.

innocent, no perfect and unambiguous and sinless choices in this world. What we call original, or originating sin, touches everything we do.<sup>2</sup>

Now return to the simple-yet-powerful image of Jesus standing in a crowd with other sons and daughters of Adam – standing in a line with other broken and weary souls, who were hoping for a new beginning by a conscious return to the ways of the Lord. After they were baptized and Jesus was baptized, something radically new took place. Despite standing upon the shards and broken pieces of a sinful past, Jesus' sandals stepped forward and water cascaded down on them, and now his footsteps and all those baptized with him would fall upon a fresh foundation for life. Baptism is the antidote to original sin. The old is gone; the new has come.

Baptism is a tremendous moment of grace, entrusted to the church yet given to all people. "You are my child," says the Holy Voice, "with you I am well pleased." "You are not alone," says the Lord of all life, "from this day forth we step away from a broken past and walk toward a different future."

Later in this service we will take time to reaffirm our baptism promises, to step out from the crowd and step forward by faith. Is that a risky step? Yes, it can be. Ask John the Baptist. Ask Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Is it difficult to move away from the past and step into a new future? Yes, ask anyone who endures the disruption of divorce, the death of a parent, partner or spouse, the loss of a job, the stigma of bankruptcy. The church can never be silent in the face of such pain and risk in this life. Nor can the church be silent about the nature of original sin and evil that taints every choice before us. That is why the church speaks with a voice that first calls us by name – acknowledging our own genealogy as children of Adam and children of God – and then invites us forward to a place of water, prayer, and grace.

Baptism is when God reminds us of what we are too quick to forget, namely that we are loved and called and in God's eyes are well pleasing. You will be reminded of this good news at the close of worship. It is something you can remember every morning when you splash water on your face, every time you look up at the sky and imagine the heavens opening in joy, every time you stand in a line with other children of Adam, children of God, knowing that in a real way, Jesus Christ is with you. And know that his grace, God's grace is sufficient for all you do.

AMEN

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Carol Lackey Hess, *Feasting on the Word*, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, Theological Perspective, p. 238.