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Luke 3:21-37
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Jesus' Baptism

Do you ever have those moments when you know for sure that God is trying to get your attention? Well, in December, I went to Mount Angel Abbey in Mount Angel, Oregon for a much needed spiritual retreat during the very busy Advent season. While I was there, I found this little yellow book titled, *Slowing Down to the Speed of Joy, The Simple Art of Taking Back Your Life*. And I thought, “Ok, God. You’ve got my attention.”

But The Speed of Joy, what is that?

Right off the bat, Kelly writes, “The busyness of our lives leaves us feeling anxious, overwhelmed, exhausted, stressed-out, worn-out, resentful, discouraged, and inadequate - the speed of our lives multiples these feelings. There must be a better way.”¹ “To establish the speed of joy in your life you will need to forcibly remove busy and urgent from your life.”²

And I thought, “OMG. This is me. God, you are speaking to right at me.”

Kelly tells the story of a famous archeologist who set off with a team to explore Machu Picchu and the ancient Incan civilization of South America. After years of planning and months of travel, their destination was now only twenty eight miles away. But, it was over treacherous terrain that claimed many lives, would require local guides and porters to get them there safely, and would take about five days.

Needless to say, being so close to achieving his dreams, the archeologist was anxious to get there. He was certain that they could make it in three days. Despite warnings from the guides and porters about the dangers along the way, altitude sickness, and other obstacles, the archeologist pushed and pushed his team until everyone else fell far behind.

At night fall around the fire, the chief guide approached the archeologist and said, “We have a problem. The porters refuse to move on. They say we must wait until tomorrow before going any further. They are afraid.”

“But why? What could they be afraid of?” The archeologist protested.

“They are afraid of losing their souls.” The chief guide explained. “Yesterday, we went so fast that we have to wait for our souls to catch up.”

¹ Matthew Kelly, *Slowing Down to the Speed of Joy* (Blue Sparrow Publishing, 2024), 35.

² Kelly, *Slowing Down to the Speed of Joy*, 7.

This was me. Leading up to Advent, I had pushed my soul so hard that I needed the next two days and nights to let my soul catch up with the rest of me.

Friends, Jesus didn't live like this. No, he regularly slowed down and stopped long enough for his soul to catch up with the rest of him. And so should we. This is the easy yoke or way of life that he invites us into.

In today's scripture story, we see one of Jesus' first slow moments before launching into his very busy public ministry. It's a moment when time stood still and God the Father literally spoke words of affirmation over His Son at baptism. While this story is capture in each of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Luke's account is actually quite short. So listen now for the the word of the Lord.

Luke 3:21-23

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened. **22** The Holy Spirit came to rest on him in the form of a dove. A voice came from heaven. It said, "You are my Son, and I love you. I am very pleased with you."

23 Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his special work for God and others.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This morning I want to talk about the significance of Jesus' baptism. Why did he have to be baptized? What happens at our baptism? How might God be inviting us to live into our baptisms by slowing down? Do our souls need to catch up with the rest of us?

Before Jesus did anything. Before the hustle and bustle of ministry. Before the multiple demands on his time. Before he taught or spoke a word. Before any miracles. Before he healed anyone. Before the cheering crowds arrived.

God spoke truth into Jesus life.

Just a river.

A prophet.

And Jesus stepping into the waters.

Jesus' baptism provides us a snapshot of a moment when God poured into Jesus in a way that helped him remember who he was and who's he was before the world would try to reform him into its own image.

By why would Jesus, the Son of God, need to be baptized? Isn't our baptism a public profession of faith in him and of repentance of sin? At first glance, Jesus' baptism can seem puzzling. John's baptism was for repentance. But Jesus had no sin to repent of.

Matthew's account actually fills in the answers for us. When Jesus came to Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. John protested, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus responded, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

This moment tells us who Jesus is, what promises God makes to us, and what it means to follow Him.

Jesus could fully identify with the people He came to save. He was born into poverty. He grew up in obscurity. He walked among sinners. And he also stood on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized with all the other people. This is a sacrament for all people.

When firefighters enter a building, they don't shout instructions from outside. No! They go in. They share the danger in order to bring people out.

Jesus' baptism is his declaration to us: "I am with you in the waters. I am for you. I will carry you all the way." He doesn't just stand with us sinners. He bears our sin for us.

And it was here at Jesus' baptism that God the Father spoke his precious affirmation over Jesus. "You are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

All of the promises from God to us were anchored in Jesus through his baptism. While he didn't need to be sealed by the Holy Spirit or to make a public display of faith in himself, he does receive all of the promises that God offers us in baptism.

While in seminary, I remembered a little song by Stevie Wonder from the 1970s that helps me remember these promises.

Signed. Sealed. Delivered. I'm yours!

In baptism, we are signed. Just as an artist puts their signature upon a piece of art so God said of Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love." It was as if God were claiming rights to his beautiful masterpiece. Through this sacrament, God claims us as beloved children.

In baptism, we are sealed. The Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians proclaimed, "Having believed [in Jesus Christ], you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession."³

The Greek word for seal means to place seal upon, to stamp, or signify ownership. Much like how people would use signet rings to put a wax seal upon a scroll indicating that the words within it were theirs.

³ Ephesians 1:13b-14.

The Greek word for deposit means a pledge or guarantee. When you purchase a house you give the real estate agent earnest money, which says that are serious about buying that property. So serious that you are willing to put money down that if you backed out, then you lose that money. Similarly, when you buy a beverage with a glass bottle or aluminum can in Oregon, you pay a deposit upfront that if you return it to the recycler you get that money back. It promises or guarantees that what belongs to the manufacturer will return to the manufacturer one day.

The same is true with the seal of the Holy Spirit in baptism. It is a deposit guaranteeing that what belongs to God will return to God one day.

In baptism, we are promised to be delivered from the grips of sin and evil. In baptism, we are washed outwardly, symbolizing the washing that takes place inwardly with our hearts. 1st John says, “If we confess our sins, [Jesus] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”⁴

Recently I had the privilege and honor of baptizing Wesley VanFleet, Janet’s grandson. Wesley wanted to be baptized in the Columbia River, just as Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. Now I could have stayed on the shore and yelled instructions to Wesley on what to do. But that’s not how Jesus modeled it for us. He got in the waters with us. So I had to get in the water with Wesley.

And so going under the water, reminds us of Jesus death and resurrection. We go under as one person, but come back up, or resurrected as another. We die to ourselves, but come alive again in Christ.

The Apostle Paul put it this way... “Whoever is in Christ...[that is baptized in Christ, anchored in Christ, secured in Christ]...they are a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come.”⁵

One of the things I was struck by as I reflected upon each of the Synoptic gospel accounts is the commonality of where Jesus’ baptism took place. John the Baptist’s ministry was out in the wilderness. Away from the crazy pace of ordinary life.

Pastor John Mark Comer in his book, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, mentions that Jesus often retreated to the desert or wilderness to connect with God. The Greek word used for desert has a wide array of meanings. Such has desert, deserted place, desolate place, solitary place, lonely place, quiet place, or wilderness.⁶

And so for Jesus to be baptized he had to get himself out into this quiet place, away from the noise of the world, far from the looming demands of ministry and

⁴ 1 John 1:9

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁶ John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (NY, NY: Waterbrook Publishers, 2019), 123-124.

expectations of others, so that he could hear what God the Father wanted to speak over him.

That he was cherished. That he was loved. That he would be protected. That he was chosen. That he was equipped for this calling. That he was God's Son.

No one was going to force Jesus into this. He had to get himself there on his own will. No one else was going to police his soul to make sure that he stayed spiritually healthy. He had to do it because his relationship with God the Father was just that important to him. And so Jesus had to get himself there. He had to offer himself for baptism.

Then notice that the Holy Spirit does the rest. The Spirit signs Jesus. The Spirit seals him. The Spirit delivers him from the temptations of Satan.

And Jesus responded simply with, "I'm yours."

The same thing is true with our baptisms.

We need to slow down enough to get ourselves there. Some of us adults have yet to be baptized ourselves. What are we waiting for? Or if we are baptizing our children, we need to carve out time to bring them here. We need to offer ourselves or themselves up for baptism. And then we must trust the Holy Spirit to take over from there.

To sign us with God's signature. To seal us with the gift of the Holy Spirit. To deliver us from the grips of sin. And to present us holy and blameless before God the Father.

At the start of my sermon I talked about the negative impact that hurry and busyness has on our souls.

Recent studies have reported an increase of 63% of young adults from 18 to 30 who are struggling with depression and anxiety. The United States ranks the highest among any other country. Contributing factors include: Social media use because we often compare our lives with other people's filtered, highly edited, and idealized lives. Academic stress because we think we need to outperform our peers in order to compete for fewer and fewer well paying entry jobs. And economic anxiety because we are buried with school debt and are struggling to afford an independent adult life style that sent us to school in the first place.

One of the reasons I believe this has become such a problem is due to the speeds at which we live our lives. Our souls never catch up with us. And we are setting this frantic pace earlier and earlier in their lives. We create a patterned life that is hard for anyone from which to escape. When does one have the chance to let our souls catch up with us? Rarely ever!

Except here in worship. This is one place where we can come to be ourselves. Here, we can be reminded of God's loving affirmations spoken over us. "You are my beloved child. With you, I am well pleased." Just as you are. Apart from what you do or what you offer. Just you.

Here, we can sing of how good God is or how hard life is.
Here, we can rest and let our souls catch up with the rest of us.
Who's ready to slow down to the speed of Jesus?
Who's ready to take back their lives and regain their soul?
Who's ready to be baptized into the slow life of Jesus, who said, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. [Slow down to my speed] and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."⁷

If we are serious about this, let us respond with "Yes, Lord. I want to live into my baptism. I'm yours."

Amen.

⁷ Matthew 11:28-30