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Isaiah 42:1-9
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

We all have heroes in our lives, whether or not you would use that word. They are people whom we admire, folks whose lives we look up to and connect with. Consciously or unconsciously, we often seek to imitate our heroes. We may not buy their favorite perfume, but we can find ourselves drawn to things related to their lives. Or we seek out experiences like theirs, if that's possible.

Today the Christian church celebrates the Baptism of Our Lord. We remember that moment in Jesus' perfect, sinless, divine life, when he was baptized. On this day, we also remember the baptisms in our own imperfect, broken, human lives. We obviously use the same word to describe an event in both his and our lives, and yet so many things about us are different. Are we just pretending to be like our hero? Or offering others the hero that we look up to?

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I hope you know that baptism, and our faith, are quite a bit more than that... but articulating why can be more challenging. We'll start with the first baptism that we hear about today, the one offered by John the Baptist. John was actually Jesus' cousin. He was the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary's significantly older cousin. In the gospel of Luke, Zechariah was visited by an angel. He was told that his son-to-be, John, "...will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God." (*Lk 1:16*) John was basically the last, old-time prophet around. He was a holy man, most certainly. He was also an odd-ball, on the margins of society. He "wore

clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey." (*Mt. 3:4*) He wasn't your normal, next-door neighbor.

John's ministry, or his role in life, was interesting, too. He quoted the prophet Isaiah's words about "prepar[ing] the way of the Lord" (*Mt 3:3*). He invited the people around him to confession of sins (*Mt. 3:6*) and repentance (*Mt. 3:8*). When John baptized people in the Jordan, they were stepping up and making a decision. They were returning to God and to their faith. They were turning away from their old ways and paths, and repenting.

Today we baptize two children who are both under the age of two years old. Obviously, our Lutheran sense of baptism is different than what John did. Neither Alexia or Kaden can speak of their faith in ways that we would understand. Their young brains can't handle making big decisions. True repentance is not quite possible for them yet. Our understanding of Christian baptisms now is very different than John's baptism.



John had known that would be the case though. In early December, we heard the passage immediately before today's gospel. In it, John himself prepares his followers by comparing his ministry and role to the one who would come. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (*Mt. 3:11*) This comparison described what John knew and understood. He knew that he was not the main event, or the teacher who would be center stage. Like everyone else, he was waiting in faith.

Since this was the case, it's easy to see why John was so confused. When Jesus stepped up, John said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to

me?” (*Mt. 3:14*) It’s easy to understand his confusion. Somehow he could see that Jesus was the one that he had been waiting for – the one who would usher in a whole new way. And yet, Jesus came to him for baptism. The one who we proclaim as without sin arrived... to participate in a ritual signifying his repentance.

The baptism of Jesus was important, but for different reasons than for the people who experienced the baptism of John. For Jesus, “suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.” (*Mt. 3:16*) John had prophesied that Jesus himself would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Though Jesus was not receiving a “new” gift, in this moment it was evident to others that he carried the presence of the Holy Spirit. The voice, which long ago spoke creation into being, said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (*Mt. 3:17*) God named a central, fatherhood relationship in Jesus’ life, for the world to behold. By speaking those words, God began creating once again, through Jesus’ life of teaching and healing, forgiving and loving.



Jesus’ baptism invoked a pattern, which would shape our understanding of baptisms in Christ’s name. It is an important moment of God’s new creation, happening in our lives no matter how old we are, or what we are capable of understanding. Through the church, we are reminded of God’s care for us as children of God. But it goes much further than that.

In water and the word, our lives are joined with Christ’s – sort of like how God’s life was joined with humanity in Christ. For us, much more is at stake in baptism. When our lives are joined with Christ’s perfect life of faith, we receive the Holy Spirit, whose presence is a promise of soooo many things. She nurtures us in

the faith. She is the giver of truth and understanding and wisdom to humanity. She brings us comfort and strength in the hardest times. She forgives our sins – in the moment of baptism, and for the rest of our lives. She draws out our spiritual gifts and empowers us to proclaim Christ’s good news with our gifts, in word and deed. All together, our lives are taken up into God’s kingdom work in our world.

In baptism, God does not ask us to make Jesus our hero or to pretend to be him. The Savior of Humanity job has been filled already. In our baptisms, Jesus’ Spirit embraces our lives in an unending, bear hug. All of us – including our difficulty putting God first, our weaknesses and our sins, our lack of faith – every part, of each of us, is welcomed in love. We are immersed in the presence of the Holy Spirit. And there, in that embrace, God has us for good. Nothing is held back from God’s power to bring about new creation. No gift remains untouched by the Holy Spirit. No treasure can be withheld.

Baptism – Christian faith – is not about a hero that we worship or want to be like. It’s not just a set of ideas that we can explain fully, though we try our best. Faith through Christ is a mysterious presence of God in our daily lives, and our experience of that gift. It’s a transformation of who we are as people to be more open, loving, forgiving, and gracious. In Christ, our lives do reflect part of him, but not just because he’s our hero. Beginning with baptism, our lives change. They become about what God is doing and creating, around and in and through us.

Today is such a moment for both Alexia and Kaden. We witness the beginning of God’s new creation in them, in the name of Christ. We, and the world, look forward to beholding the wonderful ways that God will work through their lives.