

He Got in Line, He Prayed

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Epiphany 1 year C

Baptism of our Lord

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*“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus had also been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” (Luke 3:21-22).*

He got in line. It seems that Jesus got in line with everyone else to be baptized. In Luke’s telling, in the moment there is no back and forth between Jesus and John. In Matthew’s description, John sees Jesus, and says, “I am not worthy, it is you who should be baptizing me,” (4:14-15). But in Luke’s account, *“When everyone was being baptized, Jesus was also baptized.”*

Jesus got in line with the crowds. The crowds of people who came, maybe to see a spectacle, of John the Baptist hip deep in the Jordan, dunking people, cleansing them of their sins. The people came perhaps for some break in the weary routine of their lives, or maybe in an attempt, a willful action to see if they might get a glimpse of what could be, the sacred, the Holy, the promise of something more. Some watched on the riverbanks. Some got in line. And He was in line with them.

He is baptized, and after he prays. While he prays, the sky opens and a dove descends and lands on him, from above all who were there hear, *“You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”* In previous ruminations on this passage, the heavenly dove and celestial attestation of His lineage, those are the images that have stayed in my mind. But looking at this again, I am touched and humbled by Jesus’ first reaction to being cleansed is to pray. He prays. Seems to me, he wouldn’t need to pray. Doesn’t have to take a moment to reflect. Seems to me, it would make perfect sense for him to just get on with his ministry. But instead, as the water drips from his head, falls from his shoulders, he stops and prays.

He gets in line with everyone else, with people behind and in front, when it comes his turn, he lets himself be held and falls into the water of hope. Then, standing on His own, He marks the moment, by directing his attention beyond himself toward God. He prays.

I’m just back from a three-day retreat in a Benedictine Monastery in Schuyler, Nebraska. I confess, I had romantic images when I envisioned this time away. I imagined deeper than usual thoughts with contemplative prayer along a windswept, frozen prairie. I was not

disappointed. We had ice, we had wind, we had cold. Oh, my did we have cold, over barren gravel roads and fallow corn fields. We had cold. And I had some prayer.

I have to say, I don't think I'm particularly good at prayer. My expectations were high, because why not? But my fears are also weighty. I was with several bishop colleagues, people I am convinced have their lives much more put together than mine. What if I was unable to sit in silence? What if I fidgeted? What if I was overcome with a coughing spasm? or worse, what if I fell asleep and snored? what if I left after three intense days of reflection, no longer feeling as if I might be a fake, but rather completely convicted of my lame spirituality?

Those were my fears. What about you? Do you ever find yourself comparing your prayer life, your spirituality, your connection to God, with what you believe others may have? I have a feeling I'm not alone.

Every day we gathered for some teaching and conversation and then after each teaching session we moved to the beautiful simple chapel and sat in a circle around the small square altar and entered into 20 mins of silent contemplation.

I wasn't overcome with a coughing spasm. I preempted this possibility with a well-placed cough drop. Breathing in and out, silently repeating in my mind, my prayer word, "hope". I let myself settle and be still. Random thoughts came and I did my best to set them aside and return to my breathing and my sacred word. Some of the sessions went better than others. And each pushed me past my individual concerns and fears to a space where I might be more open to Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Creator of All. I prayed. What a gift. What a space in time. With colleagues who are amazing and struggle as we all do.

He got in line.

Sometimes, despite our doubts, in the midst of our fears and pain, sometimes we have the courage to risk it all and just get in line and go and do the thing which could reveal that we matter more than we could imagine. Sometimes, because of a deep, insatiable longing, sometimes we risk it all, in an attempt to see the sacred, to glimpse our God, to be enveloped by the Holy.

Who knows what Jesus understood about himself, before stepping into the river Jordan. It's true, he'd ditched his parents and hung out at the temple with the teachers, he'd had enough sense of himself to go there and ask questions of the elders. But that was ages ago, he's a young man now, how many doubts did he have, as he got in line that day by the River Jordan.

He got in line.

Then after letting go and letting John and God, dunk him and take hold of him, he started praying.

That's the pattern I yearn for each day in my life. That I manage to get in line and take the risk, allow myself to be held by God. To risk, to act, to pray and act again. He got in line. He gave himself over, he prayed. And then, he acted again.

What about you my friends?

Amen.