

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
January 13, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7  
Luke 3:15-22**

**Sermon: Not perfect but faithful (Baptism of Jesus)**

“You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

That’s the first line of our

We have a schedule of Bible readings, called the lectionary. Every year at the beginning of the season of Epiphany, the Christian church calendar marks this Sunday to hear stories about the baptism of Jesus. So every year, on the second Sunday of January, we hear basically the same story in our gospel reading.

This means that I have preached here at Rideau Park on the story of Jesus’ baptism at least 9 times already. It’s hard to know if there’s anything left to say! Luckily there are three very distinct gospels, and we cycle through their versions on our three year schedule. The gospels are very similar, but not identical, so that usually gives me a bit of wiggle room on which to build my sermon.

This year I get to delve a little deeper into the gospel story as it is told by Luke. What struck me is not what’s there in the story, but what isn’t there. The official lectionary reading is actually Luke 3: verses 15 to 17, and then 21 and 22. Verses 18-19 and 20 were supposed to be left out. Gretchen included them in the reading today, because I left those 3 supposed to be missing verses in the reading for today. If you’re like me, you’re probably asking the question Why? Why would they skip those verses?

The three missing verses go like this:

*So with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by John because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.*

Usually the story of Jesus baptism rests on a special connection between the participants: John the Baptist is close to God, and Jesus is connected to John the Baptist – therefore there is a unique connection between God and Jesus. The presence of John the Baptist with Jesus at the river for his baptism is always key to the story.

But in the gospel of Luke, we have this awful bad news story interrupting the flow of those holy connections. An awful bad news story that lands right in the middle of the act that initiates Jesus’ ministry. John the Baptist is arrested and dragged off to prison. By a corrupt ruler, who assassinated his brother in order to take his brother’s wife. It’s an ugly footnote right in the middle of the story where God calls Jesus beloved, and at the very commencement of Jesus’ ministry.

If we were watching the baptism of Jesus on TV, there would be one of those red ribbons running across the bottom. “Warning: some people repenting and calling for the kingdom of God have experienced arrest by the authorities, extended jail time and execution for treason.”

Kind of takes the charm out of a special occasion, doesn't it?

In the other gospels, it is clearly John who baptized Jesus. And who better for the baptism of the long awaited Messiah? John the Baptist has all the credibility: His birth story is almost as compelling as the Christmas story. His time of fasting in the wilderness was much longer than Jesus' forty days. His mission has proven that John's courage and vision have blessed him with the wisdom to perceive the savior. His forthright truth-telling, the crowds who gathered to see him at the River Jordan – clearly John is a baptizing superstar.

So John's presence at the baptism of Jesus is significant in ways that are personal and familial, that are spiritual and that are social.

But in Luke, the gospel raises this tough new question – what if it wasn't John who baptized Jesus? What if John was already in prison?

On the one hand it reminds us that the journey of faith sometimes costs us something personally. The sacrament of baptism that John performs, that we perform, is a baptism of repentance. And repentance involves truth-telling. It means standing up for what is right. Sometimes that lands people in hot water, sometimes they end up in conflict with the powers that be, sometimes they even end up in jail.

This week we have witnessed individuals, groups, elders, youth, people of many different faiths arrested and jailed for demonstrations in British Columbia. I am sure there are as many opinions on that news story as there are people in the pews this morning. But the fact is, that standing up for what you believe in sometimes comes at a cost. This is what we encounter in the gospel reading today.

On the other hand, the story also teaches us about living through more personal times of grief and loss and somehow finding the courage to go on. With the tragic bus accident this week, we are all reminded of how quickly things can change for individuals and families, and how many people will be thinking to themselves: “how can I go on?”

Today we covenant with a new Executive for UCW. Every year there are changes and losses they have to report. At the same time, the women who step forward this morning demonstrate the courage and the hope as a witness to their faith, even when things are not what they might have wished.

I have this image of Jesus arriving at the River Jordan, expecting to find John there, eagerly anticipating his baptism marked by his own cousin. Wouldn't that have been perfect? But even as Jesus arrives, the news is spreading... How Herod's soldiers came and dragged John away – everyone knew what that meant.

Rulers in that time did not waste a lot of time on arraignments and defense lawyers. John was known to have criticized Herod's domestic arrangement with his brother's wife – no one really expected he would see the light of day again.

Jesus could have turned around and headed back to Nazareth. Being a Messiah was clearly too risky, the cost too high. Maybe the time wasn't right, everyone was upset about John, and afraid of being imprisoned, grieving and hurting. Beginning his own ministry in that time could be a bad omen.

And yet for Jesus, the present time was right the right time. In the midst of everyone's grief and fear, he entered the water of baptism, and perhaps it was an anonymous unknown hand that poured the living water over him. But that was enough.

It was enough for Jesus to know himself beloved. To know that God was pleased with him, especially pleased perhaps for having the courage to keep going, in spite of John's loss. Through God's love and the Spirit's affirmation, Jesus began his earthly ministry calling people to love even in the face of great loss.

The life of faith is not always easy or comfortable. It doesn't always go according to plan. And sometimes, when we are tested, it is not always easy to remember who and whose we are.

But the annual telling of this story, at the beginning of each year, from any of our gospels, reminds us that God claims each and everyone as a child of God. When we remember Jesus' baptism, we remember the connection between each and every one of us. When we remember Jesus' baptism, we remember that we are not alone in this struggle to live faithfully. Jesus stepped into the River Jordan before us, and Jesus lives through us, the Body of Christ, when we follow him.

May we move forward, knowing ourselves challenged, but also blessed, by his story and by our invitation to meet him at the riverside, where we claim his courage and hope. Thanks be to God.