

Jan. 17, 2010

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Galatians 3: 23-28

Clothed with Christ

When we were very little, our parents would dress us. We couldn't dress ourselves yet. We didn't have the strength or the coordination or even the understanding of how to dress ourselves yet. When we got a little older, first we could start helping our parents dress us by lifting our arms and then by pushing our arms through the sleeves.

As we grew we could gradually do more and more until finally we could dress ourselves. We learned front from back, inside from out, and we mastered buttons and zippers, Probably the last thing each one of us learned to do was to tie our shoes.

It took us all several years to learn all the skills necessary to dress ourselves independently. But for a little while, even once we could do all that, most of us didn't have complete control over what we wore. Our parents still probably bought or made our clothes, and we may have had some choice, but mostly it was still our parents' decision.

And then we got older and began to develop our own taste in clothes, our own opinions. We grew up enough to be able to decide for ourselves what we wanted to wear, how we wanted to look.

How we wanted to act and be seen by the world around us.

When we were little children, we didn't know how to talk about or even think about God yet. Those of us who grew up in the church learned about God and Christ in much the same way that we learned to dress ourselves. First people around us loved us and held us and showed us what it meant to be loved by God. We learned the stories of Jesus and of the Old Testament. We learned songs like "Jesus Loves Me" and "This Little Light of Mine" and "Away in a Manger."

And little by little as we grew bigger, we learned more words to talk about our faith. We learned more and more about what it means to live as Christians.

Those of us who did not grow up in the church have learned in a similar way, little by little, one thought at a time, one experience at a time, what it means to be Christian. What it means to know that Jesus loves us and that God is our creator who is gracious and merciful.

In today's scripture lesson, Luke tells us that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist when all the other people were baptized. He was not baptized for repentance. That wasn't necessary since he was not a sinner. So why did he wait in a crowd for John's baptism?

For the same reason that he become human and walked the earth among people. The same reason that he did not separate himself from the thieves who were crucified on either side of him, that he did not save himself from death on a cross.

Jesus came to be one of us, to be with us in our suffering and in our brokenness and in our dying.

Jesus waited in the crowd listening to John and waiting to be baptized to be in solidarity with us, to be one of us!

He didn't need to be forgiven. He didn't need the water to wash his sins away, because he was without sin!

What he was here to do is to show God's love in a very real, tangible, visible way and he couldn't do that from some private place, or by keeping himself apart. He did it by being part of the crowd. Whatever the crowd, whatever the people experienced, he experienced the same thing.

He came to weep with those who weep, mourn with those who mourn, he came to feel; hunger just like we do for bread and for love.

Despite what anyone says, God does not send disasters to punish sinners. God suffers with those suffer, and the proof is the life and death of Jesus Christ!

In his human experience, Christ did not hold anything back from us. He did not take advantage of his divine nature to avoid any part of the human experience, and so before he began his time in ministry, he was baptized.

Before he was baptized Luke quotes John as saying that one more powerful than he is coming, who will not baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire! That the Lord's winnowing fork is in his hand and that he will separate the chaff from the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire and gather the wheat into the storehouse.

I don't know about you, but this kind of judgemental image makes me uncomfortable. I don't like to think about "unquenchable fire". It doesn't seem like justice to punish the sin we can commit in our short lifetimes, even when it's a lot of sin, with everlasting fire!

And I don't like the idea that a person is either all good (wheat) or all bad (chaff), so I spent some time praying through this and thinking about it.

Since none of us is all good or all bad, and fire refines and purifies, then it seems to me that the unquenchable fire will burn up the bad part of each of us, leaving us purified. The water of baptism does the same thing, washing away our sin and leaving us clean and without sin. The fire does not burn us up entirely, and the water does not drown us.

The chaff, the bad parts of us, will be burned up, gone forever in that unquenchable fire. We will be left the way that God created us to be, pure and good, the way we were when God created us and pronounced his creation "good."

Chaff is not certain people, some "other" people. Chaff is the sin that we are all part of and that is part of us.

Wheat is not certain people, some saintly people we could never hope to be like. Wheat is the part of us that longs to be like Jesus.

After Jesus was baptized, Luke tells us that he prayed. While he was praying, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove.

A voice then spoke from heaven, saying “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” One translation says , “This is my son whom I love, in whom I take great pleasure.”

Imagine God taking great pleasure in you, simply because he loves you! Just like loving mothers and fathers watching their children, seeing them make mistakes, catching them being naughty, God watches us mess up and fall down and make bad choices, and he still loves us, cares for us, cries with us when we cry, and rejoices with us when we rejoice.

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith.

Do you fully believe that, in the deepest part of yourself? That you are God's child and that God loves you beyond all understanding? Because it's true. Scripture tells us that it's true. Maybe you believe that with your head, but not your heart.

I want you to know that this IS the Good News of Jesus Christ!

I want you to say right now after me, "I am a beloved child of God."

Now turn to someone else and say "You are a beloved child of God."

If you don't believe it, I want you to write it down and put it somewhere you will see it first thing in the morning and several times a day----"I am a beloved child of God"

Paul tells us that in baptism we have clothed ourselves with Christ--we are dressed in Christ, so we take on the appearance, the identity as a beloved child of God, without distinction with regard to male or female, no matter what ethnicity or race----we are all one in Christ, children of Abraham, heirs of the Kingdom of God.

As we live and grow in the knowledge and love of God and Christ, we learn to dress ourselves in Christ more and more clearly. We learn to live as children of the living God more and more truly.

For many of us, our baptisms seem a long time ago. Some of us cannot remember the experience clearly. And all of us need to be reminded from time to time of the promises that we made when we were baptized, whether we made those promises ourselves, or our parents made them on our behalf.

Those promises were made in response to the grace offered to us by God in Jesus Christ, grace that is still given to us every minute of every day, grace that allows us to call ourselves beloved children of God. In response we need to remember the promises we made---promises to serve Jesus Christ as Lord, to resist evil, injustice, and oppression, and to repent of our sin.

And so in a few moments we will reaffirm those promises, we will once again remind ourselves that we are clothed in Christ, that we have followed Christ into the waters of baptism and that we still follow him, knowing that we are beloved children of God! We may not see the Spirit descending like a dove with our eyes, or hear a voice speaking from heaven with our ears, but we can know it in our hearts.

Lord, let the fire burn away the chaff of our lives! Let the waters of baptism wash us clean once again! Until we see you in glory, let us be clothed with Christ, and live in the light as your beloved children! Amen!