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Epiphany 1C, Baptism of Our Lord: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

12 January 2025

One of my best friends and her family is coming into town next weekend, so I've been cleaning more than usual, which frankly is not hard threshold to reach, since I do not clean often. It's amazing how stuff just piles up, birthday party favors, hair clips, safety pins, pencils, small squishies, laying about in random places– the kitchen counter, the living room mantel, under the couch. The small stuff can really add up. And all needs to be cleaned up.

There is quite a bit of cleaning referenced in today's passage from Luke:

1: Of course there are baptisms happening, which were likely understood then as a kind of ritual washing.

2: John mentions he is not worthy of untying the coming Messiah's sandals. Untying sandals is a reference to washing feet. Washing someone else's feet was most commonly done after a long journey, and feet that would have been dirty because

a– sandals and

b– walking.

Cleaning one another's feet is not something friends did for one another. It's almost the equivalent of handing a guest a toilet brush and asking them to get going on the toilet

3: The cleansing that takes the most airtime in this passage in terms of actual words is the kind of cleansing the Messiah coming after John will do at some point.

John's talk about this cleansing presupposes an agrarian understanding most of us here just do not have anymore. The harvest was gathered to a threshing floor. Now I hear

the word “floor” and assume walls and a ceiling. That is incorrect. Threshing floors then were more like a big basketball slab of concrete. The farmer would toss the gathered grain into the air with a winnowing fork, which is like a pitchfork. The wind would blow away the lighter chaff, chaff being the inedible part. The grain, the part we eat, would fall back to the floor. This is where John launches into his metaphor. The wind has already separated the grain and the chaff has already happened, and the farmer is scooping up the grain to keep. Then the chaff is burned by an unquenchable fire, implying a very ferocious fire that is practically impossible to put out. That kind of fire is particularly difficult to hear about from Scripture this Sunday morning, as unquenchable fires do in fact rage in southern California now. Fire, though often understandably associated with annihilation & destruction, may at times also have a cleansing role.

Now let's be real. All this burning, separation, and winnowing sounds scary and not very baptism-y. This is not very cute baby in an heirloom baptismal gown with a nice brunch and a cake with white frosting afterwards. That we might associate with baptism. But John the baptizer is, by all accounts, a majorly off putting dude. Down South, we would say “He's something else” or a “He's a real character.” This is not just because we no longer get him. John is off-putting in his own day and age, too. In fact, in the verses that the lectionary skips in Luke John is arrested for being publicly critical of King Herod Antipas' marriage to his former sister-in-law Herodias. In other words, Luke inserts, right in the middle of this baptismal narrative, an all-too concrete demonstration that the righteous do not always succeed in the short term; that we could not be blamed for sometimes thinking that evil is winning.

John's arrest not to mention his subsequent, senseless death plops the world's tragic, dirty structure smack dab in the middle of a passage that seems to be all cleaning. But wait. There's more! There's more to muddy the clean baptismal waters. Immediately after this passage is Luke's genealogy, which we never read on a Sunday. It's on page 830 in your pew Bibles, starting Luke 3:23. Matthew's genealogy is way more famous and, to be honest, far more interesting. Luke's genealogy does have one small thing in particular worth noting for our purposes today, a name towards the very end: Seth. If you're wondering who on earth Seth is, Seth is Adam and Eve's third son. Seth is sometimes considered Abel's “replacement.” Abel, who in Genesis 4, is killed by his brother Cain. By slipping this short, four letter name Seth into Jesus' list of ancestors, the reader is confronted with fratricide in Jesus' own family tree. With John's arrest and death, with Seth's very existence, in the midst of all this mentions of cleansing, renewal, and purification, there is a considerable amount of muck, of filth hiding just below the surface.

Even Jesus cannot fully escape the tragic choices of his ancestors, the destructive actions of his contemporaries. Jesus' baptism is not merely symbolic. Jesus' baptism– and baptisms in general– is an acknowledgement of our interconnectedness, of so much that is outside of ourselves– of our relationship to one another, to the divine, even our unwilling yet unavoidable connection to the bent structures in which we all live. Jesus, after his baptism, in the years to come, will help individual folks, one by one, modeling to us that we do not have to wait for the outward structures to change in order to do something that will make an actual, real difference. The small stuff can really add up.

The ability of regular people to effect positive change feels so out of reach most days that it's barely worth talking about. And in some regards, that is fair. Yes, the small steps often do not feel like enough. And yet, as I mentioned in the Christmas sermon, Harriet Tubman led 300+ people who were enslaved to freedom, only 0.075% of the enslaved population in the 1860– less than 1%. And yet I've never heard anyone suggest she should have waited because it was not efficient. The small stuff can really add up.

The truth is, small stuff adding up cuts both ways in that our seemingly small choices normally do not effect only us. For example, something like cleaning out is not just my own individual cleaning out; how we choose to dispose of stuff has real consequences. And, y'all, though recycling is better than nothing, reducing and reusing are really the way to go.

We can't get off the grid and literally buy nothing. But perhaps we could buy nothing in categories where we don't have a need. What do we have too much of? I haven't bought any new clothes in 8 months. To be fair, I haven't grown since I don't know when and I have the same job which requires the same clothes. Some people focus on buying no individually packaged items at the grocery store, so a big bag of chips instead of individually packaged one, completely avoiding small plastic water bottles, maybe you can find shampoo bars instead of plastic bottles. And y'all, this is not about guilt or shame. It's about making seemingly small choices that affect the well being of the planet now and the generations behind us.

How much less trash could we produce? How much would that add up? Many people have stopped trying because the problems seem insurmountable. I want to live in a

world where people try, not because it makes us feel better. The small stuff can really add up...

Don't you want to live there, too?

Honestly, small stuff can add up in many, many places. I was speaking with someone once who was telling me how grateful she was for the small changes she could see in physical therapy and occupational therapy, where incremental change begets larger change.

Maybe the biggest, most important cleansing undergirding the entire Gospel of Luke, maybe the renewal here is more about ridding us of the illusion that small, individual actions cannot matter in the face of ridiculously large bent structures. Maybe we are also washing away the idea that what we do is completely insignificant, so why bother from the thought that there's nothing to be done, when there is from the lie that the system must change before we do, when it doesn't.

The small stuff can really matter.

Amen.