

St. James UCC Havertown, PA

January 13, 2019 | Baptism of Jesus | Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Rev. Emily Garcia Livingston | "Humble Servants"

The beginning of a new year usually brings about certain marketing campaigns. We see ads for all kinds of weight loss solutions, gym memberships, and exercise equipment; we see commercials for juicers and blenders and other kitchen appliances that promise to get us eating better and slimming down; we're inundated with things to buy and do to get ourselves on track for the new year. Some of us made resolutions for this new year with the intention to live life differently in 2019 and some of us desire to live differently in 2019 but have refused to make any promises to avoid setting ourselves up for failure.

Last week, we looked at the "wise" ones -- those men who travelled from the East in search of the newly born King Jesus so that they could meet Him and worship Him. They saw a bright star in the heavens and knew that that was a sign that the King of Judeans, the one whom the prophets of old prophesied about, was born. The star that shined from Bethlehem was exceedingly bright and its light led the wise men all the way to the home where the baby Jesus was. These wise men followed the light and found the light. Jesus is the light of the world and when He entered our world as a newborn infant, He brought His light to us.

John's gospel begins with a famous passage that is tied to light:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life,^[a] and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

I love these verses because they remind me that no matter how bleak things look; no matter how bad things get; no matter how cloudy and overcast the day may become; Nothing can overcome the light of Christ. I did not mention it last week, but the four Sundays in January are part of a sermon series I call "Life in the Light." This series raises the question...*How* do we live in the light of Christ...especially during challenging times.

Right now, our country is filled with so many crises. I'm sure everyone here is aware of the approximately 800,000 federal workers who are without paychecks in the longest government shutdown in U.S. history. There are thousands of other workers, including contractors and military workers living without an income. And that doesn't even include all of the related businesses, business owners, and workers who are also feeling the pain of the government shutdown.

Our national parks – our gifts from our Creator – have also been impacted by this shutdown and they are being overrun by garbage and human waste from neglect. And I haven't even mentioned the crises of the families, many of whom are decent human beings – men, women, and innocent children – who are warehoused in chain-link fenced cages due to our broken immigration system surrounding refugees and those seeking political asylum and protection. And these are just a few of the serious issues facing our country today.

How do we live in the light of Christ in the midst of all of this? One way is through obedience. If we remember the example of the wise men last week, they were obedient to God. God gave them a dream to not return back to Herod and they obeyed what God instructed them to do. After they worshipped Jesus and lavished him with their exquisite gifts, they found a different way to return home.

Over the past week, various people throughout the United States were compelled by their faith and their patriotism to be stewards of creation. They organized themselves and went to National Park sites and put their hands to work. They swept and cleaned up trash, cleaned public bathrooms, and tended to nature as best they could with the supplies and tools that they had.

One local example were the young men from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association who volunteered their time on a rainy Saturday to clean up Independence Mall. I believe they were called by God to this task. These folks were compelled to do something to make a difference. They put their love of this country and their love of God in action. Like the wise ones, they obeyed what God instructed them to do. So one way of living in the light is listening to what God is telling you and doing what God is telling you to do – this is obedience.

Another way of living in the light is by demonstrating humility. The volunteers who cleaned up our National Parks also demonstrated humility by picking up trash, sweeping, and cleaning. They did what some people feel is beneath them to do.

The Western Christian Church celebrates today as the Baptism of Jesus. Sometimes people don't know what to make of this since one of the reasons for baptism is to publicly declare that you're aware that you are a sinner in need of forgiveness and that you're seeking to follow Christ. Why then, if Jesus is fully God AND also fully human but without sin -- why would He go to be baptized? Why would He need to be baptized? Let me suggest to you that Jesus went to be baptized because He was willing to humble Himself. In humbling Himself, He demonstrated (1): obedience to His Father in Heaven and (2) that He completely identified with humanity's need for repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. We should also focus on what happened to Jesus after He was baptized.

What exactly is humility? It's defined as *the absence of pride, self-assertion, and arrogance*. Another way of describing humility is *the quality of having a modest view of one's importance* and I'm going to emphasize here that being humble is not the same as having low self-esteem. Low self-esteem damages the psyche and feeds a vicious cycle where one feels inadequate. Humility is a quality that frees you to see yourself as any other human being, no matter what their station of life is. Humility enables you to walk with another human being who is suffering regardless of your perceived status; wealth; education; community connections, etc. Humility allows you to be in unpleasant or uncomfortable places for the sake of another while not making that other person feel shame or inferior.

I don't know if any of you have seen the "Blind Side" with Sandra Bullock but there's a scene in the film where her character, Leigh Anne Tuohy, demonstrates humility. I don't want to ruin the movie for those of you who may not have seen it yet, but Sandra Bullock plays a very wealthy woman who is an interior designer and her husband owns several fast food restaurants. Their family lives in a multi-million-dollar home; they drive luxury cars; and their children attend private school. There's a scene where Leigh Anne visits the home of a woman who has suffered with drug addiction for most of her adult life and lives in a housing project in a marginalized part of the city that is extremely impoverished. When the woman invites Leigh Ann into her home, it's very dirty, trash is everywhere, and drug paraphernalia is on the cocktail table in the living room.

Leigh Ann discretely finds a place to sit down, she kindly declines a drink that the woman offered her, and during the course of their short conversation, these two women from two very different worlds, connect as mothers and Leigh Ann gets up to sit closer to the woman and holds her hand in a genuine moment of empathy and compassion. If Leigh Ann never humbled herself to drive to that part of town; if she never humbled herself to enter that home in its condition and sit down to have a talk with that woman, she wouldn't have learned what she learned in that moment.

When we think about Jesus coming to be baptized, we see that Jesus humbled himself in order to do that. Jesus is God and yet He willingly came to the Jordan River to be baptized like the rest of the people and with the rest of the people. Jesus could've made a big deal about it and insisted on getting baptized by Himself, but Jesus came with the rest of the people to be baptized. Now John the Baptist had his own followers and some of the people were wondering if John himself was the Messiah because he was preaching repentance with great power and the people respected John as a prophet of God. But John was preparing the way of Jesus. John was preparing the hearts of the people for Jesus' arrival.

As John preached to the people he also demonstrated humility. Look at what John tells them in verse 16. He says: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming;

I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” John knew that he was preparing the people for Christ’s arrival and he knew his place. John did not seek to compete with Jesus; He did not desire fame or to be elevated; John told the people that he was not even worthy to touch His sandals. John let the people know that he was not to be worshipped or praised but the One who comes after Him, the Promised Messiah, is due all the glory and honor.

What happens after Jesus is baptized is what we should focus on. We see in verses 21 and 22 what happens. Jesus prays, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice came from heaven which said, “You are my beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.” Jesus’ baptism is one of the clearest depictions of the Trinity as we see all members present at the same time: The Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this moment we see that Jesus is publicly affirmed as God’s Beloved Son and the Holy Spirit anoints and empowers Jesus for the next part of His journey -- His wilderness experience and the subsequent launch of His public ministry.

As we seek to walk in the light of Christ, let us remember the examples of John the Baptist and Jesus. In different ways, they demonstrated humility. May we also be humble servants as we seek to show the love of Christ to others.