

January 12, 2024  
Reverend Diane Burkland

A reading from the Holy Gospel of Luke, chapter 3, verses 15 through 17 and 21:22 as the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 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. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Now, when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had 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. The Gospel of the Lord. Please be seated.

And do we have children here today? Yes, we do. Yes, we do. Wonderful, wonderful. Oh, this is good. Oh, my goodness. What a whole group of you today. Have a seat. Okay. Have a seat. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Oh, good. I have enough. You wonder what I have here. Oh, shells. You're so smart. You're so smart. What can I say? I have shells here today for a reason. Not because we're on Long beach island. And there are a lot of shells around Long Beach Island. In fact, these didn't come from Long Beach Island. These are like scallop shells. And a shell has been used as a symbol baptism. And today we celebrate the time when Jesus was baptized. Now, I imagine most of you were baptized when you were little, right? Like little. Little, right? Yeah, probably. So you don't remember that, but Jesus was older when he was baptized, and we remember that each year. And that's why the shells are white. And I have on a white robe and a white stole, and everything up here is white because that's the color that reminds us of the purity of baptism. And I'd like you to look at these shells. You see, when you look at them, they have lines, don't they? Yeah, they're coming out sort of from one place here, the lines all come out. And you know what that can remind us of? That can remind us of God here and God's love and how God's love spreads out to all of us into all the world. Right. And we don't know why the shell became a symbol of baptism. Some people say that. Well, a long time ago, people used to make what's called a pilgrimage. They would walk to a special site that they felt they could meet God in a special way at that site. And along the way, because it was near the ocean, people used to line the route with shells so that the people that came from outside the area could follow the shells and get to that church. That could be one reason. Another reason could be is that the shells, you know, these shells come together like this, and there's a scallop inside the shell. Right? There's life inside the shell. And that God opens us up and brings new life forth for us. That could be the reason, too. We don't know but we just know this is a symbol of baptism. So I have shells for each of you to. To take home. And you might want to make a little picture on the inside. Maybe you'd like to make a cross. Or maybe if you find out from your parents when you were baptized, you could put that date in there. Okay. Alrighty. But there's one for each of you, and they're a little fragile, so you can't really sort of toss them around. You know, you sort of have to be careful with them. Okay. You're welcome. You're welcome. You're welcome. You're welcome. Okay, let's have a prayer. Okay. Will you repeat after me? Thank you, God, for the gift of baptism when you tell us that we are your specially loved children. Amen. Okay, you can go to Sunday school now. I don't know whether to pass these four out, whether they'll be anybody. Maybe I'll leave them around the church and people can pick them up. Or we can just use them as a reminder next time I preach. I do have something for everybody. It's a joy to have so many children here. I was preaching at a church I'm very familiar with and friendly with up in Pennsylvania the Sunday after Christmas, and I had a children's message already, and there were no children. So I said to the congregation, well, you're children of God. You'll hear the message. And they appreciated it.

So, anyway, our Gospel text today recounts for us the baptism of Jesus by John. And Luke's version is very similar to that in Mark. They both focus on the description of the Holy Spirit descending in bodily form as a dove on Jesus after his baptism. Now, Matthew includes this same information for us, but he also gives us a more intimate look into the actual baptism event. Listen to his account. Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan river to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Jesus saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? But Jesus answered, John, let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness. Then John consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Matthew records for us an honest, open conversation between two cousins, Jesus and John. Now, we really don't know how much time the two of them had spent together as little boys, maybe playing in family events or something, or as young teenagers or even as young adults. John's ministry had begun before that of Jesus, and he appeared to be a very busy man with his preaching and baptizing in the river Jordan. His was not really a cushy life with his simple clothes and his meager diet of locusts and wild honey. And he was arguing all the time, as seen with the religious leaders of the day. And John, remember, also had to keep himself physically fit for the act of immersion. Baptism does require a certain physical effort. I say that because as a student at an American Baptist seminary, I had to learn how to baptize by immersion. It was a senior course entitled worship and sacraments. Now, as an aside, the non Baptists at the seminary must have had some influence in pull, because American Baptists, as Wes will tell you, do not call communion and baptism sacraments. They call them ordinances. But there that course was labeled nice and boldly worship and sacraments. One damp, chilly spring afternoon, we all dressed in bathing suits with shorts and T shirts over them, and then sweats and carpool to a small Baptist church right outside of Philadelphia. We were a rather motley crew in that class. Most of us were Presbyterian Methodist or African Methodist Episcopal. Counting the few Baptists in the class, there were probably only five who had ever even witnessed an immersion baptism or seen a baptistry. And I was one of them that had not. And now we were going to baptize each other. Well, imagine our surprise then when as we entered from the rear, as you would here, we saw the pastor up here dumping 25 pound bags of ice into the baptistry. Seeing the aghast look on our faces, he started to laugh and he said, no, I've turned the heater on too soon and now it is so hot that you'd get burned if you got into it. It's like an overly hot spa bath. So we had to hang around waiting for the ice to cool the water down. And as we did, we looked at the robes that are normally worn and the boots, and we learned how to hold each other, what positions and everything else to do. We were paired off with classmates and I was paired off with my dear friend Quentin. 6, 4, 250 pounds. Now, I must confess I had no trouble getting him down, but coming back up, he sort of pushed himself and helped me a little bit, for which I was very grateful. There's a lot to think about during this process because the physical maneuvers and the spiritual meaning combine in a very significant way. The baptizer needs to concentrate on each person in a very specific, special way. And after this experience, I looked at these gospel texts about John the Baptist and Jesus baptism with fresh eyes. I'd always pictured John just sort of standing around waiting for the next person to come. Now I see him dripping, focusing on the person that he was baptizing in the water with him. And then I see him looking up to greet the next person and being startled to see his cousin Jesus there. And then I see him sort of looking around to did anybody else see him startle? Wait a minute, Jesus is here. Is this the way he's going to announce that he's Messiah? You know, John had been baptizing Jewish people, calling them to a new way of life and repentance. But he was using a baptism that was normally reserved for gentile converts to Judaism. How was this going to work with Jesus? I imagine him telling Jesus in somewhat of a stage whisper, maybe even with his lips sort of closed, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here. What am I going to do with you? And I see Jesus poised, calmly telling his cousin that no, this is what needs to be done. To do what God wants done right now. To fulfill all righteousness, to affirm John's ministry for Jesus, to identify with sinners, with all who respond to God's call to repentance

and a new way of life, and for the Spirit of God to powerfully identify Jesus as the beloved Son of God. Jesus didn't need the cleansing of baptism. Jesus was setting the example of a faithful, humble response to God's call on a human life. And in the process, Jesus was blessed by a powerful appearance of the Holy Spirit, who today through our baptism also appears and claims each one of us as beloved children of God. There was another time that Jesus set an example with the use of water. At the Last Supper, he knelt to wash his disciples feet. He didn't have to do that either. That was the work of a servant, not a host or a master. Protestations again greeted him. His disciples argued with him. Then he plainly told them that he was setting an example of how he expected them to treat one another. He knew his time with them was short. This might be considered, he thought, his final words of instruction and encouragement to those disciples. I'm not sure we think today in terms of setting examples with our behavior. You know, I imagine as children we remember that our parents or grandparents or even our teachers told us to be a good example for our younger siblings or cousins or the younger classes in school. You know, we certainly do need good role models today because most of the people out there in the public eye are not what we would consider to be paragons of virtue. Do we, as we go about our daily tasks, consider the examples that we are now, Sometimes Christians of a more conservative ilk might have a list of thou shalt nots, a list of don'ts. As one of my seminary friends used to say in jest, thou shalt not drink, swear, dance, fool around, smoke or chew tobacco, that is, or tolerate those who do. I'm not talking about that kind of negative witness. I'm talking about a more positive kind of witness. And I'm not talking about the kind of kneel and pray in the workplace witness that we see sometimes among athletes. Personally, I think that that's what Jesus decried when he talked to the religious folk of his day and said, beware, don't practice your piety before others just to be seen by them. I prefer the often attributed to, but probably not actually stated by St Francis of Assisi perspective. Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words. Jesus, as he set an example for us, revealed more of the Father's heart. Are we in our daily lives showing forth the father's heart? About 30 years ago now, and it seems like a long, long time, I had a friend who had an awakening to an epiphany about this idea of being an example. We were all mothers of young children meeting for a weekly Bible study. We all considered ourselves women of faith. Jenny, not her real name, was a feisty, fun loving woman. One morning she arrived to the study more subdued than usual. What's up? We all said. Well, she replied, you know those bumper stickers that the senior highs are selling that have the church's name and logo on them? Yes, we responded. Well, she said, I bought one and put one on my car. So we all said, well, on the way here, while I'm driving, some nitwit cut me off and I was ready to lean on the horn and make my usual hand gesture when I realized I had the bumper sticker on my car. What would that have said about the church had I done that? Jenny knew that we are to bless and not curse others. Yet she saw her conduct in a new light because of a bumper sticker. We might say that she, at that moment began her ministry of example. Let's face it, we set examples every day. Someone once said that for some people, the only Bible they read is the lives of Christians. What do our chapters and verses look like if people were to read both our individual lives and the corporate life of Zion Lutheran Church, what would they learn of God? Would they see something of the generosity of God reflected in our gifts and works of charity? Would they see something of the kindness of God as they witness how we care for and treat each other? Would they experience something of the hospitality of God because of the way we open our congregation to others, the way we welcome people to worship and our community? Would they see something of the peace of God by the way we order our lives? Would they see the hope of the Resurrection by the way we face tragedy and death? Or would they see people just as confused and frustrated and frazzled as the rest of the world, our theology at odds with the way we live our lives, our walk not quite in step with our talk? How was Jesus able to live so true to his calling? Well, the most obvious answer is duh, Jesus was God, we are not God. End of discussion. However, we also say that Jesus was fully human and as a human functioned with the same abilities that we do to reason, plan and prioritize. Perhaps a key can be found in John's description before his narrative of the foot washing in chapter 13 of his gospel. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up

from the table, took off his outer robe and robe and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples feet and wipe them with a towel around his waist. Jesus knew from whence he had come and where he was going from God to God. He viewed his life through the lens of eternity. He was more concerned with the affirmation of His Heavenly Father than the affirmation of human beings. His understanding of who he was in his Father's eyes enabled him to live fully as God intended, both with His Heavenly Father and with his human being friends and people that he met along the way. Another key to Jesus faithful walk was our Lord's deliberate decision to carve out time to be alone with His Heavenly Father either first thing in the morning or at the end of the day. Even before he had met all the needs of everybody surrounding him. He wanted and needed time apart to know His Father's will and to commune with His Heavenly Father. If Jesus needed it folks, we need it even more. I imagine many of us began January with a list of New Year's resolutions. Some of them probably are still accurate and running well. May one of them be to do as the Apostle Paul declared to young Timothy to set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. And in so doing we will be following the example of our Lord and walking in his steps. We will be grateful. Amen.