

Lectionary C January 10, 2016 Baptism of Our Lord
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church
Evansville, Indiana
Pastor Roberta Meyer

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Missing Verses, Herod, and Our Freedom

If you notice, there are three verses in our Gospel text, that were skipped. Maybe the lectionary pickers didn't think those three verses were relevant, or maybe they knew we had a lot planned today, and we needed to cut the service a little short. Anyway, whatever the reason, three verses were skipped and whenever I see this, my curiosity gets to me and I have to look up the missing verses.

So after John says that he is *not worthy to untie the thong of [Jesus'] sandals*. And that *[Jesus] will baptize [everyone] with the Holy Spirit and fire*. And before the "*Holy Spirit descended upon [Jesus] in bodily form like a dove*." Those three verses say this, "*So, with many other exhortations, he, [John The Baptist] proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him 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.*"

OK, now I see. Maybe these verses blur things a little for us. Throwing that thing about Herod in there, messes up the order of things a little and doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the story. It is kind of like those reading comprehension tests I used to give my first graders. "Read this paragraph and cross out the sentence that doesn't belong." One moment John is standing in the Jordan River baptizing Jesus and the next moment Herod shuts him up by throwing him in prison.

The phrase, "*shutting up John*" jumped out at me. Herod has been on edge since that Epiphany day when those wise men came looking for the baby Jesus. He must have thought he took care of that, but here some thirty years later, the word "messiah" is popping up again. Now John is the one he blames. So Herod throws John in prison to shut him up.

What if Herod had listened to John? What if Herod had witnessed Jesus' Baptism? What if Herod had been open to a new power, the power of being God's child?

But that wouldn't happen because Herod was really evil. That is what the verses say. Herod could not listen to all of what John said, because if it happened that he would really believe what John was teaching—well, his whole life as he knew it would go down the tubes, or should I say "Up in flames."

Now, I want to make it clear, I am not sympathizing with Herod, but I have to admit, there have been times in my life when I probably felt some of the same fear Herod felt. I was baptized at five. And now I realize that was a pivotal time in my life. But as I grew and became a young college student, just beginning to feel my independence, I was afraid to really listen to the message John was delving out. I guess I was sort of afraid of my baptism. What if getting close to Jesus, meant my whole life as I knew it would go down the tubes?

The thing was, I was not listening to the whole message. I was, in a sense, “shutting up the messenger.”

This repentance thing is a big deal. John’s message is filled with frightening imagery. Here are John’s words from the Message Bible about what Jesus came to do. *“He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”*

Wow! What if I liked the stuff Jesus wanted to burn as trash! It felt like I was losing power over my life. “Make a clean sweep of my life?” Sounds drastic, whether it goes down the tubes or not, sounded like Jesus planned on my life never being the same. That’s why shutting up the messenger seemed like the safest thing to do, but thank God, Jesus didn’t let me have the last say.

I needed to hear the whole story. I needed to hear about the Holy Spirit coming down in the form of a real live dove and landing on Jesus and God’s voice shouting from heaven, *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

This gift of Jesus’ Baptism that we celebrate today, is for all of the ones like me, who had trouble listening to the messenger. Jesus came to the river to be baptized by John the Baptist for us. He came to be baptized in front of a community of God’s children to show us what happens during a baptism. He came to show us how the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit swoops down on us. And how God’s voice declares us God’s Beloved children, with whom God is well pleased.

The fire John talked about is the flaming love of the Holy Spirit. And the cleansing? The repenting? I see now that this cleansing is not the taking away our freedom, rather repenting gets rid of the stuff in our lives that keeps us captive—hatred, greed, shame, fear. When Jesus makes a clean sweep of our lives, all those false powers that try to control us are put out with the trahs to be burned—and we are filled with the power of God’s Love.

That’s what we are celebrating today. The fact that baptism is a tangible real live sign that God claims us as God’s children in the same way God claimed Jesus. Remember, I told you I was baptized at five years old? Well, the fact that I can still feel the water trickling down my face onto my collar, tells me that was a powerful time of my life. I have been swimming in my baptism all my life, even when I was fighting it. Just like we read in our text from Isaiah, Jesus shows us that at our baptism God *“called [us] by name,”* and said, *“you are mine.”* And God never lets go.

Because Jesus came as Lord of the all creation and God's Son, we don't need to cling to things that give us false power. Jesus came as one of us so we know that the same voice that our Psalm is praising, the one that spoke and creation happened—that voice is stirring up power in us.

When we live in the power of our baptism, we are absolutely free. We are free to follow in Jesus' footsteps helping the needy, feeding the hungry, welcoming the shunned, loving the unlovable.

And I know from experience, even when we try to shut up the messenger, God's voice of Love will never be quieted. When we listen to the whole story we will always hear the voice of God proclaiming, "*You are mine.*"

And no one can ever shut up God's Love. Hallelujah!!!! Amen.

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