

“The Beginning and the End”

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

After seeing the title of this morning’s message, you’re probably wondering if my message is APOCALYPTIC, that is, that it’ll resemble one of those “end of the world” sermons you hear in those more fundamentalistic churches. Well, you can all breathe a little easier for my sermon deals not with THE BEGINNING AND THE END OF WORLD HISTORY but rather THE BIRTH AND CONCLUSION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE- of our INTRODUCTION to it and the END GOAL which God desires for each one of us. As we’ve now begun a NEW year, nothing can be NEWER than when a process of transformation takes place in a person’s life, when what the Bible calls the “OLD man” has suddenly become “NEW”- someone now possessing an entirely NEW character and facing a whole NEW future!

Our New Testament lesson opens with our Lord’s baptism on the shores of the Jordan River at the hands of his cousin, John. During the first thirty years of Jesus’ life, he had been preparing himself for the special role he was about to assume. Now, however, the time has come for him to step upon the WORLD STAGE and fulfill what he’d been sent to do. John was preaching a baptism of repentance- calling people to turn from their sinful ways and to recommit themselves to the righteousness of God. But Jesus, the “sinless one” didn’t need to repent of sin. Rather, by allowing himself to undergo John’s baptism, he was not only demonstrating his identification with the rest of humanity, but publicly dedicating himself and his new ministry to the cause of God and God’s kingdom. It was here on the BANKS OF THE JORDAN that the great Old Testament prophet Elijah conferred upon Elisha, his disciple and successor, a double-portion of God’s Spirit before being carried up into heaven in a chariot of fire. Likewise, it is here at the JORDAN RIVER that the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon Jesus and where he heard those affirming words of the Father commissioning him, “Here is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” God’s imprimatur--his divine stamp of approval--had been given him and he was now ready to undertake that long, lonely journey to the Cross.

For the past two thousand years, the authority to administer that SAME baptism and initiate persons into God’s kingdom has been given to the Church- Christ’s Body. It was an essential part of our Lord’s Great Commission that they were to go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through this simple rite of either immersing someone under water or sprinkling water upon one’s head, whether it involves an infant child or an understanding adult, we believe that something profound and supernatural takes place. When seen through HUMAN eyes, it resembles a bad bath. However, when viewed through the lens of FAITH, it becomes the most SIGNIFICANT event to ever take place in one’s life. It signifies his or her entrance into God’s kingdom and the public acknowledgement of God’s claim over his or her life. When viewed through a spiritual prism, at the moment that child or adult receives those cleansing waters, he or

she is dead to sin and alive to grace forevermore. In the same way that the heavens opened and a dove descended and the affirming words of the Father were heard by our Lord, no less do the heavens open for US and the Spirit anoints US and the very same words are uttered by OUR Heavenly Father, "Here is my beloved Child of whom I am well pleased!"

But baptism is just the BEGINNING of our journey. We have miles to go and it will often come at great cost to us- although not MERELY as costly as it was for Christ himself. For many in our church, an infant who has been baptized will be cared for and nurtured as we would one of our OWN children. This Body--despite its usual problems and conflicts and dysfunctions--will become the perfect soil in which the seed of that young child's faith will take root and grow. For you see, God entrusts US with that infant's life as surely as God entrusted us with the life of his OWN infant son- and WOE unto us if we cause one of these little ones to stumble! The church MUST play an essential role in our children's lives if we want to see developed in them a strong sense of values and moral commitment. Do we not promise during the sacrament to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?" To NURTURE means giving to the child that which will nourish him or her. It is a deep caring for all aspects of the child's life and development, the feeding of the whole person, including the moral and spiritual. ADMONITION, in its deepest sense, refers to the parental responsibility for providing direction or teaching in the life of the child. According to the Bible, caring for and teaching our children for the purpose of helping them to become disciples of Jesus Christ are the most BASIC FUNCTIONS of parenthood. This is the Christian's greatest dream and the expression of their deepest love for their child.

In time, that seed of faith will germinate and proceed to work its way throughout that child's life--producing what St. Paul calls "the fruit of the Holy Spirit"- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Through spiritual disciplines such as Bible study and prayer, through attendance in Sunday School and worship, we learn that God has been active in and through human history, using God's own people to help transform it. We discover that WE become Christ's arms and legs and voice in this world and are commissioned to go to those same difficult and disturbing places HE HIMSELF frequently went. HE CALLS US TO COMFORT THE LOST AND LONELY even as he dried the tears of a forlorn widow in a forgotten outpost called Nain. HE CALLS US TO LIFT UP THE WEAK AND THE POWERLESS even as he conferred dignity on a woman who was not only a Samaritan but a SINFUL Samaritan woman at that. HE CALLS US TO TEND TO THE SICK AND SUFFERING even as he healed the affliction of a hopeless leper, the greatest outcast in the ancient world. HE CALLS US TO EMBRACE MISFITS AND UNDERDOGS just as he welcomed prostitutes and tax collectors, demoniacs and even the "heathen" gentiles. He bids us to follow him into those places that are NOT so pleasant and NOT so desirable- like hospitals and drug rehabs, nursing homes and community jails; into places NOT so safe and clean as many of the homes and tenements, streets and back alleys of our inner cities.

Church, if baptism represents our BEGINNING or INITIATION into the kingdom of God and of the Christian life, what then is the END or GOAL of it? What is God's ULTIMATE INTENTION for each of our lives- this may be one of the most significant questions never asked of ourselves. Might it be going to heaven? I can't tell you how many

times I have heard my more conservative friends say that they got “saved” so that they could gain a seat at the table in heaven somewhere. Or is it to perform all kinds of good works in this world, that is, making the kingdom of God a reality on earth just as it is in heaven as so many of my more LIBERAL friends contend? I seem to remember St. Paul warning the Corinthians that if we gave all our possessions to feed the poor but did not have love, it would profit us nothing? Or is the objective of the Christian life PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION, that is, turning away from illicit desires to become a more MORAL or GOOD person?

Well, I contend that the answer is really NONE of these! I can’t emphasize MORE STRONGLY that the goal of the Christian life is NOT to go to heaven; it is NOT to do all kinds of righteous works in the world; and it is NOT simply to be a more moral or good person. Now I’m not denigrating or minimizing the importance of these but as essential as heaven and morality and good works are to our Christian lives, they are mere BY-PRODUCTS of our spiritual lives and not the END GOAL. RATHER, the goal or object or end of all our lives is something else ENTIRELY- it is MATURITY AND GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT AS A HUMAN BEING THROUGH A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

Now Church, hear me on this. The end that God has ordained for each of us is that we might GROW, DEVELOP, and MATURE in our Christian lives. God desires a certain process to be ongoing in our HEART and our MIND and our SPIRIT and our SOUL. God would have our knowledge of his divine activity in the world EXPANDED, our cares and sympathies ENLARGED, and our pities and concerns MADE EVER WIDER. Maturity means being a different person today from who we were ten years ago, and being a different person in a decade from now from who we are today. Certainly, change is NEVER easy but it is a necessary prerequisite to being a whole and mature Christian individual. It is a tragic situation when one is perpetually immature, when one thinks that to be a Christian is to align oneself with a certain political agenda, or to merely keep the Ten Commandments, or when one’s ability to pray is limited to “Now I lay me down to sleep”; when there is no personal knowledge of Jesus Christ who never stops promising that NOTHING will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. The reality is that EVERYTHING is present this morning for what ANY of us needs to mature and to become everything God desires us to be- whole and healthy children of his. We only must be willing to avail ourselves of that.

This morning, during our service of worship, we are going to be re-installing new church officers for the coming year. This is indeed a high honor and a tremendous responsibility. It requires people who are NOT ONLY willing to roll up their sleeves and be excited about the great work before us here at our church. It ALSO requires persons who are SPIRITUALLY MATURE, people who LOVE God and LOVE the PEOPLE of God and who never want to STOP growing. I had a professor many years ago who said that his goal when he was a pastor was to raise the spiritual level of every one of his members so that EVERYBODY in the church could QUALIFY to become a leader in it. I think that is a noble goal and I have the same desire for each of YOU.

But how do we know if we are growing? How can we be sure that REAL spiritual development is taking place in our lives? I believe we CAN know IF we are deliberate and

intentional about our faith; IF, rather than being casual or lazy about it, we cultivate our spiritual lives through those disciplines which are essential to Christian growth- disciplines such as prayer and regular Bible reading and personal reflection. WE ARE MATURING when, like the Psalmist, we can say that our highest joy is to worship God among his people, when being in the house of the Lord on Sunday mornings becomes the high point of our week and our ultimate delight. WE ARE MATURING when we use those spiritual gifts God has endowed us with, when we enthusiastically participate in one of the ministries of our church- whether it is helping out with Sunday School or singing in the choir, acting as a greeter or serving in the food pantry, volunteering at the front desk or agreeing to work on one of our church committees when you are asked. WE ARE MATURING when our love and concern for people go beyond our own family and friends to the larger world around us, when our interests become less limited and less parochial to embrace persons who are different and even less fortunate than ourselves. WE ARE MATURING when, in the model of our Lord, our feet walk in the way of peace and our commitment is to greater social justice in our society.

My friends, we have to ask ourselves EVERY DAY, “Is my devotion to Jesus Christ ENLARGING? Is my capacity to give and receive love as well as feel sympathy for others EXPANDING? Is my understanding of the world around me BECOMING WIDER? Am I CONTINUING TO GROW both as a person AND as a Christian? For the answer to such questions will help determine, not just our LIVES TODAY- but our ETERNITY TOMORROW. Now, let us now proceed to the installation (or re-installation) of these elders, these “mature” Christians who are AGAIN willing to assume the duties and responsibilities this office requires...