

“Powerful Testimony”
BAPTISM OF THE LORD
(Video Filming Sunday)

By Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Preached: 1/13/19

Last week we celebrated wise ones from the East, who saw a shining star as powerful testimony that God was up to something. They followed the star to find the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. In a way, we still follow that star. We're on a journey, an adventure with God, anticipating new beginnings as God guides us into 2019.

This Sunday, we witness Jesus' remarkable baptism by John the Baptist. Before the event, though, we hear John's powerful testimony. Some had wondered if John himself might be the messiah, but he would have none of it. *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...*

The crowd must have been stunned to hear John speak in such a way. They could not have been used to him humbling himself. Instead, he was known for humbling others, calling them to repentance, to change their ways. By all accounts, John the Baptist was an imposing figure, a wild man, dressed in animal skins, rough around the edges.

I think of him as sort of the Jack Lambert of prophets! Jack Lambert, of course, was the middle linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers for their first four Super Bowls. Lambert prided himself on his ability to hit hard and intimidate the opposition. He was described by opposing players as

“terrifying, crazy, punishing, imposing.” The great quarterback, John Elway, used the word “menacing.” Facing the linebacker as a rookie, Elway said of Lambert: “He had no teeth, and he was slobbering all over himself. I'm thinking "You can have your money back, just get me out of here. Let me go be an accountant." I can't tell you how badly I wanted out of there!”

I imagine John the Baptist had that same kind of effect on his hearers. People flocked to the wilderness to hear his raw preaching...but nobody wanted to get too close! They were mesmerized by his words, compelled by his message...but he made them a little nervous. So to hear him defer to Jesus as messiah was to hear a powerful testimony.

Later, when the gathered people saw Jesus wade down into the river, they saw John's prophecy about Jesus come to life: the heaven was opened, the Holy Spirit came down

as a dove, and there was that booming voice from heaven. We pair that story with words from the prophet Isaiah – God’s own words on the lips of that ancient prophet. *Do not fear...I have redeemed you...I have called you by name...you are mine.*

One of my colleagues pointed out this week’s texts reveal the truth that worship, that knowing God and being claimed by God, is nothing short of a full-body experience: every sense engaged, every feeling evoked, every cell of ourselves swept up in the waters of baptism and held in the arms of our Lord...Imagine if all the people coming into churches this Sunday were filled with that expectation, what if we truly came to church today anticipating that God would call our name, rescue us from the floods threatening to overtake us, shield us from the fires that would consume us and fill us with the flames that reveal the Word of God. What if we came to this place and heard the voice of God...what if you heard it? God saying: You are mine. You are beloved. I am so pleased with you.

When in your life have you heard such powerful testimony? How have you felt claimed by God, empowered by God’s Spirit, affirmed in your calling? Maybe it was in a church service...where a scripture jumped off the page and gripped your heart...or a song touched your soul...or a word caught you off guard, surprised and convicted you.

But maybe it wasn’t in church at all. Maybe you were overwhelmed when you were in nature, or maybe in the confines of your own home, while you prayed quietly. Maybe it was a strong personality that spoke to you, even a John-the-Baptist type, who helped you not only hear the Word of God, but understand it. Have you dreamed a dream or witnessed a miracle lately? Have you been rescued from the jaws of a lion or healed when healing seemed a distant hope? Have you crossed paths with a true disciple of Jesus or been flabbergasted by God’s amazing grace?

I suspect you are here because you have been witness to powerful testimony – you have been intrigued or compelled or persuaded or convinced – that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, Jesus. You have heard or seen or felt the Good News of the Gospel. There is powerful testimony in the pages of scripture...but God’s Spirit still descends like a dove in our own day. We are God’s witnesses. We, too, have been cleansed by the waters of baptism!

We have all been privy to powerful testimony – but we cannot just experience it...we must gift it. We ourselves, as we live lives of authentic faith, as we speak the truth in love, as we are people of grace, and forgiveness, and hospitality and peace, we can be powerful testimony to others of Jesus as Savior and Lord. Sometimes our testimony is voiced...sometimes acted out.

This new video can be a testimony. We want to broadcast the Good News of our family of faith here; how we are celebrating and serving God in all kinds of ways. We should

not keep secret that God is in our midst! May this video be a part of our testimony. May it convey a sense, a feeling, a clear inkling to those who see it that something special...even holy is happening among us...and let us welcome others to "join us on the journey."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.