

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD – 1/13/19

“Skin in the Game”

(Luke 3:15-22)

Two weeks ago, the Gospel of Luke told us the story of the boy Jesus – then 12 years old – staying behind at the Temple in Jerusalem after the Passover in order to sit among the teachers; listening to them and asking them questions. All without ever telling his parents that he was going to do this, of course! Which, as we heard, worried them no end.

Well, this morning, in the continuation of Luke’s story in the very next chapter, it’s now approximately 18 years later. We know this because in verse 23, immediately following our reading today, Luke tells us that “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.” That is to say, Jesus did not actually begin his ministry until he was, by the norms of *that* day at least, pretty much a middle-aged man.

In other words, a bunch of time has passed since his birth; a *whole* bunch of time. And, even more importantly, not all that much has really changed in the interim. The Romans are still in charge. The family of Herod is still running things there in Palestine. And humanity still finds itself stuck in the grips of sin, death, and evil.

As Scott Hoezee points out, for 30 years the Son of God has been on this earth, “but never *once* did Caesar or Quirinius or Herod have any changes made to their legislative agendas *on account* of this divine presence.” Or to put it another way: Not once did any aides or assistants, to Caesar, Quirinius, or Herod, rush into the cabinet room or office to notify their boss about some new movement that was turning the world upside down. Because, quite frankly, nothing had yet really

happened to *turn* the world upside down. It was still pretty much “business as usual.”

Oh, sure, God had *landed* on earth, so to speak. God had made his *move*, says Hoeszee. But life still went on pretty much as it always had before.

The only thing that *has* happened is that now John the Baptist was apparently getting impatient. So he shows up out there in the wilderness (as we heard during Advent) preaching a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Telling the throngs, who had come out to hear him speak, that they needed to change their ways; that they needed to bear fruits worthy of repentance, he said.

And, then, as our reading this *morning* opens up, John is also telling them that one more powerful than he is coming. I baptize you with water, said John, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Moreover, he will clear his threshing floor, said John, gathering the wheat into his granary, but burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. A pretty serious message, don’t you think?

But then, as we read on, we have something unusual in Luke’s story; several verses that seem somehow out of place – which, of course, is why they are normally left out of the reading for today – but which I decided to include. Why? Because I figured if Luke didn’t want them there, then he wouldn’t have written and put them there in the first place. Right?

These verses – eighteen, nineteen, and twenty – inform us that, even while John was exhorting and proclaiming the good news to the people,

and they were eating it up apparently, Herod the ruler, however, was not all that impressed. Nor was *he* moved or motivated to change his *own* ways. If anything, his behavior became even worse; if that's possible. In fact, the only thing Herod *is* motivated to do is to now throw John into prison. And, ultimately, to *also* take John's life by beheading him.

In other words, other than this crazy prophet preaching out there in the wilderness, nothing much else seemed to be happening. The bad guys are still in control, the little guys are still being roughed up and taken advantage of, and nothing is really improving or getting any better.

And yet John had been full of all this helpful advice, hadn't he? Repent, be baptized, and then go out and bear fruits *worthy* of your repentance and of this new life that you are now going to lead.

And when the people asked John what exactly he *meant* by that, he told them, as we heard several weeks ago. Whoever has two coats, share with anyone who has none, he said. And whoever has food must do likewise.

When the tax collectors came up to him and asked, "What about us?" John answered: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And when some soldiers did the same, asking "What should *we* do?" John responded, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages."

Solid advice, all of it. *Specific* advice, even. Here are some everyday examples of just what I'm talking about, said John...

But you know what? I'm not really sure it had any lasting effect... unfortunately. Now *some* people probably listened and took John's advice to heart. I'm sure they did. And then even tried to implement it. But just like modern-day New Year's resolutions, they probably weren't too successful sticking to it; that is, following John's advice and making any lasting changes in their priorities and lifestyle.

Why? Well, I'm sure there are any *number* of reasons why. But one of them is simply this: Giving people advice rarely works. You've probably noticed that yourself.

Perhaps you've tried to help someone out, and offered them what you consider is much-needed advice. Maybe you were able to see clearly what they needed to do or to change in their lives, and then tried to share these insights *with them*. But it rarely works, does it?

Again, there are probably a whole host of reasons why this is so. But the simple fact remains. People do not usually respond positively to mere advice; even *good* advice, even the *best* advice.

So is there another way? A better way? According to Thomas Plante, there is. Writing in *Psychology Today*, Dr. Plante offered this: "If we *really* want to encourage behavior (or belief) change in others we actually need to move away from advice giving (especially when our advice is unsolicited, he adds) and toward *modeling* (instead). In other words," he says, "we need to be an *example* for others rather than telling them what to do."

Again, John the Baptist was *full* of good, sound, practical advice. But I think Dr. Plante is right. That he's on to something. Advice, *by itself*, just isn't enough...

And I think that this is *exactly* the point that Luke is making in today's reading as well. John was full of advice and insight. But nothing had really changed, had it? And all it had gotten him, *personally*, was being thrown into prison.

But then Jesus comes along, and we hear *this*: "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.'"

Short and sweet.

In other words, instead of *telling* them to be baptized, instead of *lecturing* them about the *need* to be baptized, or instead of *scaring* them into being baptized, Jesus simply waded into the Jordan River and was baptized *himself*!

No fanfare. No big promotion. It's not even clear, from Luke's version of the events, that anyone else even *saw* the Holy Spirit descend on him like a dove, or even *heard* that voice from heaven reminding Jesus that he was the beloved Son. It may very well have been something that only *Jesus himself* actually saw and heard.

And if that's the case, then what took place is rather unremarkable in and of itself, wouldn't you say? That is, there were no stirring words.

No dramatic speeches. Just Jesus stepping into the river to be baptized like everyone else.

Which, of course, then begs the question: Why? *Why* did Jesus allow himself to be baptized just like everyone else, especially when we know that he didn't *need* to be; the simple fact being that he had no sin in *need* of repenting?

To answer that question, I want to first tell you about one of my favorite TV shows. It's called "The Profit" and it airs on CNBC.

It's a reality show starring entrepreneur Marcus Lemonis who works each week with small struggling businesses that typically are in real danger of going *out* of business, quite frankly. In exchange for his personal, financial investment in them, not to mention his business expertise and advice, and also his hands-on work and efforts, these companies then have to give him an ownership stake in the company in return. In other words, he becomes their partner. As he says in the opening to each episode, "My name is Marcus Lemonis. I risk my own money... to save struggling businesses."

And that's where *this* show is different from many of the other business reality shows currently on TV. In many of the others, you see, the expert comes in, evaluates the situation, and then offers the owners some practical, specific advice – but *only* advice – on how to get their business back on track again.

So I've seen other programs where someone comes in to save a struggling restaurant, or a bar, or even a motel. But in each of *those*

cases, at least as I understand it, the expert only offers his knowledge and advice and expertise. Nothing else.

In other words, they have “no skin in the game,” so to speak. I’m sure you’ve heard that expression before. Having “skin in the game” basically means that you are making a *personal* investment in some endeavor. And usually it refers to making a *financial* investment.

It’s believed, for instance, that the term was originally coined by billionaire investor Warren Buffet (although he denies it), and it refers to a situation in which investors use their own money to buy stock in the company that they are helping to run. The idea behind this is the belief that these individuals, who have invested their *own* money, now have a personal “stake” in the company’s success and future.

The point here is that it’s real easy to offer advice and suggestions when it’s someone *else’s* company, or someone *else’s* money, or someone *else’s* future, you’re dealing with. But now when you yourself are a stakeholder in this company’s future; again, when you have some “skin in the game,” you are going to be personally and totally committed to making it a success.

My point here is simply this. John offered advice; sound, practical advice, to be sure. He *told* people what they needed to hear and what they needed to do in order to get their act together and their lives back on track.

Jesus, on the other hand, even though he also offered sound, practical advice as well – the *best* even – took it one step further, however. In other words, Jesus had some “skin in the game.”

You see, for centuries, God's prophets, up to and including John the Baptist, had spoken God's word to his people; they had instructed them on how to think and act, had advised them on what a faithful life was all about...

But with limited or, at least, short-lived results. The people often listened. They *tried* to do their best. But they inevitably and invariably fell short.

What was needed now, therefore, was a change in plans; a different approach; a brand new strategy. No longer was God simply going to offer his people some sound advice. No longer was God going to simply tell them what to do.

No... Now God was going to step *himself* into the human condition. As John's Gospel reminds us: "And the Word became *flesh* and lived among us." In other words, Jesus was God "in skin." He took on our humanity, warts and all. In Jesus, God now had some "skin in the game," so to speak. He had a vested interest in our future because now he shared *personally* in that future. In Jesus, God had made a personal investment...

Going back to the TV show "The Profit" for a moment, Marcus Lemonis just doesn't invest his own money in these business ventures, however, he also invests *himself*; in other words, he rolls up his sleeves and goes right to work with his new partners, sharing in the labor and the day-to-day challenges with them. That is to say, there is also some "sweat equity" involved here as well...

Well, isn't that what God has *also* done? God takes on our humanity to get some skin in the game. But God doesn't just stop there *either*. In Jesus, God rolls up his sleeves and gets to work – not only *advising* people what to do – but also showing and demonstrating firsthand for them what living an authentic life of faith is really all about. Setting an *example*, therefore, not merely words, to follow.

As Dr. Plante, who I mentioned earlier, has observed: If you really want to encourage change in others, you need to move away from advice-giving and toward modeling. You need to be an *example* for others, instead of just telling them what to do.

Again, isn't that *precisely* what Jesus did? He modeled for us an authentic life of faith. He set an example for us to follow.

So, going back to our gospel reading this morning, when Jesus was baptized he willingly, intentionally put *himself* under the power of sin, death, and evil. Why? Because that's where *we are*! Or, to put it another way, before we were ever baptized into Christ – Jesus was baptized into *us*! He became *one* of us! He became our partner in exchange for an ownership stake in our lives. Why? Because he wants us to be his people, and to live now as his body, the body of Christ, in the world.

So he took on our humanity – our weaknesses and shortcomings and failures – and then overcame them in a way that we never could. And in overcoming our sin and brokenness, Jesus opened the door to a brand new life; a brand new set of possibilities; a brand new future...

You have perhaps heard of the island of Molokai. It's one of the Hawaiian Islands. And it has quite a history. Back in the late 1800's, there was no cure for the highly contagious and deadly disease called leprosy. A disease that would attack the extremities of the body; the ears, the nose, the fingers, the toes. A horrible, dreadful disease that today, fortunately, is curable. But it wasn't back then.

So in order to keep this dreaded disease at bay. In order to keep it from spreading and creating an epidemic, the government would send lepers to a colony on the island of Molokai where they would be secluded and isolated from those who were *not* infected with the disease.

Well, in 1873, there was a brave, young Roman Catholic priest named Father Damien who volunteered to spend his life serving the people in this leper colony on the island of Molokai. When he arrived, he was startled to see people who were not only suffering physically, but also socially, emotionally, and spiritually as well. There he saw extreme drunkenness, immorality, abuse, and an overall sense of hopelessness.

What he saw were people who desperately needed to know the answer to a question we *all* ask: Where is God? Quite simply, they needed God's loving presence in their lives.

And, so, in 1873 Father Damien came to live among these 700 lepers. He came to know firsthand the dangers, and see firsthand the inevitable results of this highly contagious disease.

He not only ministered and preached to them, but he also built hospitals, clinics, churches, and even some 600 coffins. And the whole time he

was also giving them – in word and deed – the answer to that question: Where is God?

Whenever a church service was held, he would stand up in front of the lepers, and he would warmly and lovingly address them as “my dear brethren.” Until, that is, one morning in 1885, when he was 45 years old. On *that* morning, and in a clear, calm voice, instead of “my dear brethren,” he began with the words, “My fellow lepers...”

Yes, he too now had contracted that dreaded disease.

It was out of love that this humble priest had come to be with and to live among them. Out of love, he had served and ministered to them. Out of love, he gave those lepers a gift that would change their lives for all eternity when he shared with them the answer to that ever-present question: Where is God? But the only way he could *truly* give them that answer was by becoming *one* of them...

Out of love, *God's* great love for us, the Word became flesh and lived among us. Out of love, God sent Jesus to have some “skin in the game.” Out of love, Jesus served and ministered to us, and gave us the gift that would change *our* lives for all eternity. He shared with us the answer to that ever-present question: Where is God? And he did so by becoming *one of us*.

You see, he invested his own life, even to the point of death, death on a cross, in order to save a struggling humanity from the grips of sin, death, and evil. And that's not only the good news; it's the *best* news!

Amen.

