

**January 13, 2019 The Baptism of our Lord
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GOSPEL

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The holy gospel, according to Saint Luke, the third chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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."

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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.
Praise to you, O Christ.

One of the things I love about having a God like ours, who shows up in the midst of our ordinary days...is that you can bump into whole new dimensions of meaning of...for example...the Baptism of Jesus...and perhaps the whole event of the Incarnation...from the vantage point a slightly-too-bendy-for-comfort folding chair at a car museum auction.

I had actually never been to a real auction until this past summer...so this was really only my second one. I've realized that I find auctions fascinating and suspenseful and stressful...but in that way amusement park rides are suspenseful and stressful. I think they're really fun (auctions...not amusement parks)....and also sort of strange.

A room full of people gathers for the sole purpose of deciding, together...and yet, in competition with each other...how much certain objects are worth. They may be the lifelong accumulation of a person's earthly treasures. It can seem sort of sad to see them separated from each other...scrapped over by strangers. But, this week, I was struck by how it is also true that a person can love something and it can still be joyful to see it loved again by someone new.

In any case...that experience of the drama of the auction...of the tension between bidders...and even within someone's own mind and heart as they wrestle within themselves about how much something might be worth to them...all with an auctioneer's droning chant in their ears...*that* experience and the story of Jesus' Baptism and the freshness of the Incarnation all met in my mind as I thought about the cost of things that really matter...not so much to me or the people at that auction...but also to God.

God has entered our world and our life now...Jesus stands beside the Jordan River, about to begin a ministry like nothing else the world has known...and that will cost him greatly before very long.

When it comes to making sense of the birth, life and death of Jesus...I've never been terribly satisfied with the explanation that Jesus had to come and die as a replacement sacrifice to account for the wrongs of humanity. What we call "substitutionary atonement theory" in theology conversations feels too cold, too much about the accounting book that lists our sins, and too much about someone needing to suffer punishment...for our God who we claim is Love, itself.

Atonement is finally and fully about making what is broken whole again...making it one...again...but it needs to be more than the ledger book.

As I sat in that auction, though, I thought about the cost God pays in a different way. As I sat in the stress and thrill of deciding what something might be worth...whether I would raise my hand...pay the current cost...I also thought about that item up for sale...about to be owned by...well...this person...or that one...or maybe that quiet one up front...holding back until the end. I realized that there are some things whose cost I could never pay...and that there were many others that simply and quickly became too costly for me to consider.

But what if...what if God is a bidder in the room?

Because, as often as not, I think we feel less like bidders than like the item on the auction block. Of course, most of us in this room, do not come from a heritage where any of our ancestors have been literally been valued, bought, or sold in this way. So, we probably feel this in a less than literal way. Yet, it would be wrong to use a metaphor like this without acknowledging how real and wrong this experience has been for many precious children of God over time. There are some things we simply cannot claim any right to. We cannot...and should never have built a world based on the claim that anyone could...own another human.

Yet that is part of our story. And it is not altogether gone. To the best of our understanding, that is what happened to Jayme Closs, who was mercifully found alive this

past week after being missing for 3 months...because someone in this world wanted to possess her. It is what happened to far too many girls who have been victims of Robert Kelly, but who haven't been the subject of news reports...because our world pays less attention to the suffering of people of color.

Sometimes humans try to claim ownership of each other in ways that are horrible and wrong...

And...in smaller ways...all the time...there are people...or powers just beyond our ability to perceive them...that seem to want to claim us...to possess us. Whether it is our anxiety...or our work...or our material belongings and comfort...There are many levels on which we might feel like we are waiting to see who we really belong to...or if we really belong. These things feel like bidders trying to lay claim to us.

I say all this because, when Jesus brings us to the waters of the Jordan, he is revealing something that changes everything about that bidding war. In his birth and now his baptism...Jesus is laying a claim. Is paying a cost. Is making a bid...one whose extent is still being revealed to us.

You see, God created the world out of the desire for relationship, for community, for love...and God left enough room for creation to be free...free to choose that relationship...or not...because without the choice, it wouldn't be real.

And then...from every moment on...God has done whatever God could do to offer love and life...to hope we would choose to say yes. God doesn't coerce us...but God does show us...over and over and over again...that God will pay any cost to be close to us...even taking on our frailty in being born as one of us...and even facing death when we refuse to accept him.

Anytime we pay a cost, we give something up...the possibility of going a different way...of keeping the security of whatever we've paid for the sake of having what we want. And God is willing to pay any cost...over and over and over again...so that we can be with God.

Of course, if we strain this metaphor to its limits, we may wonder...isn't everything at auction worth a different amount? What if I am barely worth anyone's time? I would be the nearly forgotten thing in the corner...not the fancy thing on the cover of the catalog. That's for sure.

But what if I told you...that your value to God *is* no less than every other precious Creation. God will pay whatever it takes. No question or hesitation. And if there are

powers and forces competing to possess you, God outbids them all. God outbids our ancestors who thought they could own people stolen from another continent...God outbids your anxiety about not being good enough...God outbids loneliness...alcohol...God outbids the kidnapper...the bully...God could care less what the amount is on paper. God simply wants to pay whatever it costs to be able to be close to you...so you might say yes to being close to God.

Finally, on this Sunday of Christ's Baptism...I want to say that I think there is a reason that we are taken to the water to be claimed by God...because the water is the place where we come closest to the unseen evils and uncertainties that will always lurk in the shadows...that will uncurl clawed fingers from the corners...It is where there be monsters...It is where mortality is always close at hand...because water is not home...It stops our breath...It can swallow us up. It can represent all those things that might want to possess us.

So, it is at the water's edge that God stands to make God's winning bid, God's claim...on us...And it is through fire that John says Jesus' baptism will bring us...

It is through that which we can't survive...through that which by owning us would destroy us...that God draws us to God's own self. Nothing less.

From the time of the prophet Isaiah onward, we have been heirs of the promise – I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. Though you walk through the waters, I will be there, and through the flames. I am with you.

Child of God, do you know how precious you are? Do you see the other beloved ones surrounding you? Can you imagine living in this world as if we knew that nothing can outbid God's claim on each one of us? That we are priceless? How might we cherish each other and this world, knowing how fully God loves us...that God will pay any cost to show us that love?

May we be blessed with the sacred imagination to walk through the world believing this for ourselves...and for all those we meet along the way...

Thanks be to God. Amen.