

Calvary Presbyterian Church
January 10, 2010
Diane Hutchins

Luke 3:15-18, 20-21
Acts 2: 37-42

A few times during the year the suggested readings for the morning replace the Old Testament reading with a reading from the book of Acts. Acts just doesn't fit into any of the general categories of scripture. It is not an epistle like the letters that follow it in the New Testament—although it is addressed to someone named Theophilus, in the opening sentences. It is not a gospel, like the four books that precede it, because it does not tell us the story of Jesus, although it begins with the risen Christ giving his final instructions to his followers. It might be best to think of Acts as *Luke II, the sequel*. It is the writer of the gospel according to Luke telling us what happened next. So, during the Easter season, and a few other times of the year, like today when we stand on the banks of the Jordan waiting for things to begin, we hear a reading from this first century history book.

My bible titles this book, *the Acts of the Apostles*, although many have suggested it should be called the *Acts of Peter and Paul*, because they are the main characters—the first half focused on Peter and the church in Jerusalem, and the second half on Paul and the spread of the gospel to the ends of the known world. Perhaps more appropriately, we should call it *the Acts of the Holy Spirit*, because the movement of the Spirit into the lives of these people at Pentecost is the real crux of the story. Peter and Paul—and all the other characters in the story—are merely carriers of the Holy Spirit that arrives unexpectedly (?) at Pentecost and fills them with the power to change the world.

This morning, we are remembering our baptism—always an appropriate place to begin the New Year; at the beginning of things. I hope you already feel a bit water-logged as we have been wading in the water since the choir called us to worship. Hear the word of the Lord from the book of Acts, as the people ask the preacher, “What do we do now?” Acts 2: 37-42.

Who Are You?

I finally managed to meet my new neighbors this week. They moved in before Thanksgiving—at least I think they did. That's when the real estate sign came down and the lawn service stopped tidying up the yard before dawn every Monday morning. We had such a comfortable relationship with the folks that moved out. We had lived side by side for 25 years. We raised our children together. Our daughters got married on the same day. Even if I didn't see them for months at a time, I knew who they were. Now I am going to have to apologize to these new people about the English ivy that has escaped from our yard across every barrier any of the neighbors could dream up. Judy and George remembered the patch of bare ground over what must be a pile of construction debris in the back corner of our yard when I stuck in those three

tiny sprigs of ivy. I'll have to explain it to Brent and Laurie one of these days. They were very gracious and seemed glad to meet me, but they didn't tell me their last name. They told me they were from Chicago. I can hear that in their voices. They didn't introduce their children. Laurie said her six weeks of maternity leave was up next week and she would be going back to work. But she didn't tell me what she did. I wonder whether the children will go to daycare of some kind; or, if Brent will stay home with them. He didn't tell me what he did either. It's hard to get to know new people. You really have to make such an effort. What kind of questions can you ask without seeming excessively nosy? What do I need to know about my neighbors? That's always a problem for interim pastors, too. What should I ask about, and how will I remember the parts of everyone's story that they do tell. How much information do we need in order to say we "know" someone else?

They told me in seminary that preaching was two-way communication. You can't really preach to people that you do not know. So, who are you? I've been working on that question fairly diligently for a year now. We started with that adult Sunday School class last year, where I asked the 30 people, who probably showed up mostly to find out who I was, to tell me what they knew about Calvary Presbyterian Church. I wasn't surprised that not everyone knew how many people were on the staff here, or that only a handful of elders had any idea at all about the size of your budget; or, that not everyone remembered your history in exactly the same way.

"*Who are you?*" is a hard question. We spent a lot of time together last spring trying to define who we are—using the Great Ends of the church as our guide. We talked for several weeks about what we do to maintain divine worship, to proclaim the gospel, to provide shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for the children of God, to preserve the truth, to promote social righteousness and to exhibit the kingdom of God to the world; and what we wish we did better. We are not finished with that process. I have analyzed what was said and argued with folks about what it meant for most of this fall. I believe that the question, "*Who are you?*" may be the most profound question we are ever asked; and the most difficult to answer. It's hard as an individual. *Who are you?* It's even harder for a whole congregation to answer. The answers that this congregation drew up seven years ago when your last interim pastor worked at helping you answer the question, is not the same answer we find today. The problem with, "*Who are you?*" is that it is always in process. It's as if the question has to be "*Who are you today?*" We continue to digest all the information; we worked on it yesterday at the session retreat, and we are not done. We are in search of a complete and accurate picture of who we are. You have to know who you are AND who you believe you want to be, before you can recognize who God is calling to lead you into the future.

The gospel lesson for this morning begins by telling us that the people came to the banks of the Jordan "full of expectation" to hear someone preach—wondering exactly who he was. We are standing together on the banks of the Jordan—at least metaphorically—amidst all this water on this morning. In the Bible, the edge of the Jordan is where things begin. Joshua stands on the banks of the Jordan waiting for God to tell him it was time to bring the people into the Promised Land. Elijah is sent to the Jordan—fed only by those ravens—to wait for God to call him to begin his ministry of annoying the King. Even Jesus goes to the Jordan to begin his ministry—to be baptized. It's the place where everything begins.

Most of us don't remember the occasion of our own baptism. But, for all of us, to remember our Baptism is nothing less than to remember **who we are**. It is to remember the covenant promises. Martin Luther insisted that he needed to say, "I am baptized!" every morning when the first drop of water splashed on his face. What a simple act—to be washed with ordinary water. Every time we wash, to be reminded of our Washing.

Presbyterians are very clear that baptism is a one-time thing. Our action is merely a sign and a seal of what has already happened in God's realm. Think of it like that piece of paper that someone hands to you when you graduate from High School—mine was beautiful certificate with my name hand done in calligraphy and with embossed gold seals and tied up with red and blue ribbons. The paper is not my high school education—that had already been done—but the paper is the sign and seal of what had already happened. God calls us before we even know about God. That's the wonderful story that we act out every time that we baptize a child in the congregation—or an adult for that matter. God calls each one of us by name and claims us. God wants us to hear the same message that Luke reports Jesus heard when he was still dripping from his baptism—"You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21). God extends all the covenant promises to us before we can possibly have any understanding of what they are. We climb onto the Ark with Noah and his family and are rescued from the floods. We march into the Red Sea behind Moses, escaping from bondage forever. We cross the Jordan with Joshua into the Land of Promise.

We don't have to remind God that we are baptized; but we often need to *be* reminded ourselves. God is faithful to all the covenant promises. God is always faithful to us. Human beings, however, are sometimes not. Sometimes we are fickle. Sometimes we forget. Sometimes we willfully don't do what we promise. At Baptism, parents promise "to live the Christian life and teach that faith to their child." Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. Some children grasp what we intend to teach them; some of them miss it entirely or reject it out of hand. If there is a godparent or sponsor, that person promises, "to support and encourage you to become a faithful Christian." Sometimes they take that promise very seriously. Sometimes they disappear from your life immediately after the party. In Presbyterian liturgy, the congregation promises on behalf of the entire church of Christ "to nurture you by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging you to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church." Some congregations are very serious about this promise; others don't much notice that they have made it. Some members of congregations think it means they have to take a turn in Activity Time even after their own children are grown, or teach Sunday School, or mentor one of the young people or new members in the congregation. Others think they have to write checks to support a comprehensive Christian Education program. Others don't. I made that promise at the Baptism of two small boys at a church in Damascus, Syria a few years ago. I pray that their church will still be there to nurture them as they grow. I wonder what responsibility we have as a church to make sure there is a church in Syria that can nurture young disciples and tell the good news of the gospel in a very hostile world. God will be faithful, even when we cannot be.

At Pentecost, those people who heard Peter preaching the good news with a new enthusiasm—indeed that word actually means, "filled with God." incredibly appropriate for that morning when the wind of the Holy Spirit had just blown into the room and spewed out into the surrounding streets—those people in Jerusalem asked, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37). And

Peter's response is "Repent and be baptized." Turn around completely from being among those who crucified Jesus to being among those who serve him. Know that you are forgiven for who you have been, and become who God wants you to be. You don't have to live in your past; you are invited to find new life in the future that God has planned. To be all that God created you to be. Accept all God's promises for yourself and for your children. Let yourself be removed from the culture around you—a culture of greed and violence and power—and become a part of the church. I'm sure that Peter knew that changing a mind-set to focus on love and peace and gentleness doesn't happen all at once. It is seriously hard work. It's a conviction that needs to be renewed regularly.

Repentance is not something that can possibly happen just once—either before or after Baptism. It's an ongoing task. It's not only that we have things to regret again this year, it's that we are still fearful of striking out in a new direction—of listening to that uncomfortable fire of the Holy Spirit within us that forces us to see poverty and injustice, that will not leave us alone to find comfort in the old and familiar, that sends us out to tell the good news to friends and to strangers. This passage that began with people asking what shall we do, ends with the picture of the Christian community that is as relevant today as it was on that day the Peter baptized 3,000 new disciples. "They devoted themselves **to the teaching of the apostles**—I think that means reading the scriptures, studying together, wondering together about what it all means and coming to worship—**and fellowship**—I think that means they spent their free time with other Christians, laughing, and crying, and talking about the weather and raising their kids together, and pulling up the ivy, knowing that this company would feed their spirits—**and breaking of bread**—I think that means they ate together regularly and in eating they remembered the life and death of Jesus; a practice that developed into the liturgy that we know as the Lord's supper—**and the prayers**—I think that means they prayed for each other, with each other, and took time to listen for God to speak to them. Advice from the first century Christians that could enrich your life today—and our life together as a church.

The new children's catechism begins with that most basic question. Who are you? It's the first thing a child needs to know; and the answer is given to us at Baptism—at the beginning of it all. *Who are you?* And the most appropriate answer is always, "I am a child of God." You, too, are a beloved child of God, with whom God is well pleased. That's where it starts. Remember your baptism and give thanks.