
BORDERLANDS OF BAPTISM

LUKE 3:15-22

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 13, 2019,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

The heavens are opened. Prayers rise from the baptized. The Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove draped in victorious Duke blue. A voice, sounding like Charlton Heston or James Earl Jones, rings out from heaven, claiming Jesus as a son, a member of the family of God, and loved unconditionally. It's a new life, a new beginning in the wonder of water. Cue the angelic choral music, please. All of these things are true and beautiful and good, as we've observed today.

But something different caught my attention this time around. The Revised Common Lectionary planning team, those who put together the cycle of biblical readings for each Sunday—what we call the lectionary—skip over verses 18-20, so the lectionary reading from Luke is actually verses 15-17 and 21-22, but this morning we intentionally included what the lectionary excluded. It isn't always what or who is there that is intriguing, but what or who is not there that can be rich fodder for our faith. In this case, what we often neglect to see or what we don't often discuss and what the Revised Common Lectionary skips, is what's around the edges of baptism, on the borders of baptism that actually help to give a fuller understanding of what baptism is. So this morning, I want to go to the borderlands of this baptismal story of Jesus and explore what's around the story of Jesus, literally. I want to go to the borders and see what and who is there because the borderlands matter too—who and what are there should matter to us and to the Christian faith. Just because some verses are omitted in a lectionary reading doesn't mean they aren't important to the whole story of God in Scripture. If we limit ourselves to only reading the lectionary, we will miss the whole counsel of God and we will miss the borders around the baptism of Jesus.

The borderlands are a part of baptism's story and without them, we don't have the full picture and meaning of our own baptism. My first observation is this. The borderlands reveal the communal nature of baptism. On one level, skipping over verses 18-20, which you heard read and was about Herod putting John in prison because he was rebuked by John for his evil deeds, can be viewed as an overlooking of those who have helped us get to where we are today and paved the way to our own baptism. The borders illuminate the community surrounding us and supporting us. Jesus didn't get to his baptism by himself; he had others, like his cousin John, pointing toward the way throughout his life. This becomes even more striking if we look to the scriptural border after his baptism. Those borderlands include a long, long list of his ancestors. “[Jesus] was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.” We might as well add that Jesus was a redemptive son of a gun! Jesus comes from somewhere, someone, some place and was surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses that brought him to where he was in his life and made him who he was. The same is true for us. Our ancestors, our relatives, our communities, lead us and support us in our own baptism. We didn't get to today without them. Someone passed on the faith and taught us. We are because they are.

Albert Einstein says, “We eat food that others have grown, wear clothes that others have made, live in houses that others have built.” We are because they are and if they are relatives on the border like John and the list of the ancestors of Jesus, then literally their borderline DNA is a part of our DNA and they are in us, with us. In the

borderlands, there are people who can help us on our journey, but if we never pay attention to the borders of this baptismal story, we may never recognize this and think it's just about us when it really is about the entire community. So maybe we shouldn't just remember our baptism but remember those who led us there and nurtured us on the spiritual journey, those who, like us, are members of the one body of Christ. As folk wisdom says, "Don't forget the bridge that brought you over." And in the Gospel of Luke, the bridge is often found in borderline, marginalized figures who are outcasts—women, the poor, the lepers, paralytics, the crippled, Samaritans, lost sons, children, and widows. Luke compels us to see the borders and to cross them in the life of faith to do ministry in the borderlands while expanding our own relational boundaries because through baptism, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of [us] are one in Christ Jesus" (Galat. 3).

Observing the borderlands of baptism reveals something else as well and this is my second observation. The borderlands reveal the character of baptism. The borders of the baptismal story of Jesus—thinking of the imprisonment of John and the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness in chapter 4—reveal that there are risks associated with baptism. When you are baptized into the life and body of Christ, you will risk life and health and even be tempted. To be baptized into Christ means there is a cross to bear in the life of discipleship. However, some saints of a safe sanitized religion may try to put up a wall on the border to keep the truth about baptism out of our lives in order for it not to be tainted with the unpopular truth—the truth about those suffering in prison or dealing with temptation in a wilderness. On the borders of baptism, you see that life in the Spirit isn't always easy or rosy. Sometimes, doing the work of God and living the life of Christ will land you in prison, showing us that not everyone who's in prison belongs there. Sometimes life in the Spirit will lead you into a wilderness and not just take you out of one. The borders of the baptism of Jesus offer lessons in the spiritual life and challenge us not to just want the good life without remembering that bad things can happen to good people and do so, all the time.

The borderlands of baptism show us the hard truths of a baptized life and what you may endure. Our baptism calls us to remember what and who is on the borderlands—the Herods, the Johns, the prisons, the ancestors, the temptations, the wildernesses. Studying the edges of our faith provides us a fuller story of Christian baptism. It's not just about the heavens opening, the Spirit falling, and a dotting Father, accompanied by a delightful bouncy organ postlude to send us back into our privileged lives. The whole story of faith, when we pay attention to the borders of scripture and the borders around the baptism of Jesus, includes not only water but fire, James Baldwin's "the fire next time," the fire right now, the fires of California, the fires burning of unresolved issues in our urban and rural areas; there is fire, even in the baptized life. But how will we know this if we don't ever read the borderlands, the surrounding borders of this baptismal story? The borderlands of baptism show us the burdens that can be a part of the Christian life.

Just because you follow Jesus doesn't mean bad things won't happen to you because a faithful, Spirit-filled life does not lead to so-called success. You can do good for God and still end up in prison like John or the apostle Paul or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, Jr and many more. The borders reveal that being a baptized Christian is not some sort of inoculation against pain and struggle. Ignoring the borders makes it too easy to think the Spirit descending is all there is at baptism, rather than also including the necessary wrestling against the sin of Herod's political injustice in the borderlands.

Reading the borders or borderlands of baptism will show us what the entire baptismal life is really all about. When one is immersed into the death, life, and work of Jesus Christ, there is definitely great abundance and joy but also great risk and struggle. When one is baptized by the Spirit, the same Spirit that leads Jesus into a wilderness, one can't overlook, forget, or ignore the borderlands, because the ministry of the baptizing Spirit is most prominent there. The initial proclamation of Jesus reveals this: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The Spirit's work is among the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed; in other words, in the borderlands. Jesus crossed the borders of heaven to reach down to us with God's redemption on earth and he continues to cross over into the borderlands to do the work of God in the power of the Spirit. That means baptism into Christ makes us border-crossers for the gospel. Sometimes to experience the gospel more fully we need to go to the borderlands of our baptism.

And when we go, we'll see that we are never alone, have never been alone, but have brought a large community with us, even if we wind up in prison or a wilderness. The borderlands can be a blessing. I hope to see you at the border.