

1 Epiphany – Year C – January 10, 2010
Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Some years ago now, a very dear friend of ours who was staying with us decided to make supper for us. When I came home from work she was holding her wounded hand and straight away said that we needed a new can opener because the one we had just didn't work. I was a little puzzled, the can opener was working fine the last time I'd used it. I had even shown her how the opener worked from the top of the lid, rather than from the side. In turn, she showed me a mangled can, and her cut fingers. When she thought the can opener wasn't working properly, she'd abandoned the process half way through and used a few other handy implements to pry back the lid to get the contents out, cutting her fingers on the edge of the can. I felt really bad because she'd cut her fingers so painfully, and especially so because her wound was so unnecessary. The can opener was still working fine, just not in the way she had thought it would work.

Our reading from the Gospel of Luke today also has a few puzzling aspects for us in how best to open it up. Probably like some of you, I have always wondered why Jesus was baptized. After all, you and I are baptized to become members of Christ's Body, and through this holy sacrament we receive forgiveness for our sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God incarnate and lives a sinless life, so why does he consent to be baptized? In the Gospel of Matthew, there is some attempt at an explanation as Matthew includes a little conversation between Jesus and John with Jesus telling John that His baptism is to fulfill all righteousness. In Mark, there is no attempt to explain, Jesus is simply baptized, and the emphasis moves quickly to the descent of the Holy Spirit, and God's voice from heaven. In Luke's Gospel, John makes it perfectly clear that he is not Messiah, and that Jesus is more powerful than he is. When it comes to the baptism, Luke cleverly positions Jesus as one who stands in solidarity with all those being baptized by John. In other words, the implication is that Jesus is being baptized with John's repentance-baptism not necessarily because he needs to repent, but perhaps for other important reasons.

We often use the word solidarity when talking about a theology of liberation. As many of us already know, this theological movement came to prominence in South America in the late 1960s. Generally, liberation theology focuses on the church's responsibility to the poor and marginalized, especially in freedom from all forms of oppression, through the practice of socio-political reform. Jesus does indeed come to the world to set us free from slavery to sin and His mission fulfills the prophetic promise of preferential care for the marginalized of society. Jesus' life, death and resurrection can even be considered the ultimate Divine statement in opposition to political oppression and injustice. Jesus' consent to baptism may well be part of His desire to identify Himself as fully human, in solidarity with a people, a nation, a world of sinners who all need God to set us free.

On the other hand, as we apply the can opener to the task, we have to make sure that it fits well, so we don't injure ourselves in its operation, or introduce any extraneous material into the contents of the can. Each can offers many points of access, but they all meet smoothly as the circle closes at the end of the opening process. During the season of Advent, we heard how John proclaims his mission as a prophet to prepare the way of the Lord. John's repentance-baptism helps the people to re-align their wills with God's will, and therefore makes us all ready to recognize and receive Jesus as the Messiah, Lord, and savior. Is it a good fit then to entertain the possibility that Jesus' own consent to be baptized was one of the first public declarations of His ministry of perfect obedience in aligning His will to the Father's will?

In Luke's Gospel, we find Jesus at prayer more than in any other Gospel account. Luke wants us to know just how Jesus maintained His perfect obedience and discernment of God's will, and how

you and I can begin to live into our own baptismal promises through a life of prayer. There is no doubt that the practice of prayer is a vital part of a faithful life. As it was for Jesus, so it is for you and me. It's no coincidence that when asked, Jesus teaches His disciples to pray to God the Father saying, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". Nor is it any coincidence that Jesus' life reflects so many aspects of God's will for His children. Everything from careful study of Scripture to its teaching. From healing the sick, to pointing the way to reconciliation with God. From personal prayer to corporate worship. And from speaking out against injustice, to restoring the marginalized and forgotten to full inclusion in family and community. Throughout the Gospel of Luke and its sister Scripture the Book of Acts, prayer is associated with God's revelation and commission, as well as empowerment. For you and me, God reveals His will to us in prayer, helps us to discern the work He has given us to do, and through the Holy Spirit empowers us for mission in Christ's name.

We might think of prayer as one of the ways that we can pry the lid off the can, and reach out to God. On the other hand, we might consider prayer more as the way that God cuts cleanly through the metal that protects our hearts, and gets straight to the good stuff inside. Either way, have you ever opened the can to find that the contents have settled out into layers? In Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, we also have a few layers to bring together. After Jesus is baptized, Luke tells us that He is praying. Then the heavens open up, and we are told that, "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.'" Firstly -- important for Luke and for us -- God reveals His presence during prayer. Then God anoints Jesus with the Holy Spirit, described for us like the coming of a dove. Luke goes to a lot of trouble to make sure that we understand that Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit is not just symbolic. Likewise, when we also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at our own baptism. There is a physicality about Luke's description, telling us that the Holy Spirit is to have a distinct and visible transforming effect on Jesus, and on all who are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit. All four gospel accounts talk about the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. Today, the dove represents peace. In Scripture, we also find the dove playing an important role in the story of Noah and the ark, bringing to Noah a sign of new life and renewal. Jesus public ministry begins after He receives God's anointing in the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the Holy Spirit equips you and me for our own work of ministry in Christ's name. In practice, our transformed lives are a witness to God's peace, to a new way of living life, and to life eternal through faith in Christ.

Finally, in the words of God, we find a solid, foundational layer and basis for our own faith in Christ as our Savior and redeemer. God's words affirm Jesus' true identity as God's only and beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased. Our own baptism defines your relationship and mine with God in Christ. In Him, you and I are also beloved children of God, sealed in baptism by the Holy Spirit, and named as Christ's own forever. In baptism, we are adopted by God, and are made members of one another in Christ's Body, the church. In Luke's gospel, whatever is characteristic of Jesus is characteristic of the church. We are in the season of Epiphany, which is a season of light. As we come full circle in opening this passage from Luke, it is useful to return to the opening lines and ask whether we too are "filled with expectation". Are we too filled with questions about God's rebirth in our own lives. This community of faith is a vessel of God's love in this world. As we continue to open ourselves to the Light of God in Christ, through our prayers, Bible study, and worship, and all the practices of faith, what might be revealed to us? Will God surprise us with His gracious in-breaking? The lid may not always come off in ways that we expect. Yet, we are confident that whatever else God will reveal, we will always find His goodness and love. We will find salvation and true freedom in Christ. God heals our own hurts, and helps us to heal the wounds of the world in Christ's name.

Amen.