The Baptism of Christ
Luke 3

Rev. Judith Medeiros
Second Church, Plymouth

They gather each Sunday on the lawn of Boston Common. Cold, ragged, dirty and hungry, oh so hungry. From the crevices of buildings, shielded against the cold or heat, they appear; the invisible, the unwanted, and they gather hand to hand.

A quiet cold morning rises with the silence, crisp air as the city awakens, the brittle grass receives the multitudes. No bell is ringing. No doors have swung wide open. No cushioned seats await their tired souls, their aching bodies. And yet they come, swarming to the Common to worship.

We had arrived the night before; welcomed into the sanctuary by a group of dishelved men.
Back packs and sleeping bags in hand we made our way to the pews and sat, waiting. None of us knowing what to expect as the lights grew dim. After worshipping together we were led into the streets of Boston in the dead of night, our guide, a homeless man

"Here is where I sleep in the summer", he said, "under the shade of this tree. In the winter, we all try to find someplace warm. Often we have to sneak into the subway and hide, catching a few hours sleep before the police come through and kick us out. My friend Manny, he died there, frozen. This is the shelter, but sometimes I wonder what it is a shelter from. A guy took a knife to my throat one night. I never went back. McDonalds used to let us use the bathroom, but now, they keep it locked and charge a quarter. We have to ask ourselves, do we want to spend the quarter for the bathroom or get a few more for a cup of coffee."

"Losers", most of the kids had thought as we arrived. Their own fault. Drug addicts, prostitutes, lazy, moochers." They kept their distance as we crossed Tremont Street.

"I used to be a teacher", he said, "at Newton North."

Newton North? They grew a little closer, bending their ears to hear. Some were students at that high school.

"Lost my job in downsizing. Made poor investments. Couldn't pay the mortgage, got repossessed. Drowned myself in a bottle, I found myself on these steps."

He was one of us; a displaced Newtonite, a forgotten scholar, somebody's teacher, husband, father, friend. He was one of us.

They all had similar stories. Matthew was particularly prolific and bemoaned the locked doors of the church. He drew picture after picture of chained cathedral doors; of fists knocking and no one answering. And like his name sake wrote under each one, "When you did it for the least of these".

On Saturday morning, the steps swarmed with those looking for a new-old coat, a pair of shoes with less holes, maybe a better heel. Men, women, children, grateful for a sandwich and a place to sit; a place from which they would not be ejected. Loitering was permitted here.
"I spoke Spanish to a little girl", my Rachael told me later, "I helped her and her mom find her a sweater."

"He gave me his coat in exchange", said Bobby, "I thought he'd keep both, but he took one and gave one. 'Maybe someone else can use mine', he said"

"I came here thinking they were all drug addicts, lazy, no-good bums," a very brave young man stood and announced.

We were all gathered in the fellowship hall, processing what we had seen and done; stereotypes broken open, worlds colliding.

"I thought it was their own fault" he said from the crowd, "and now I know I was wrong. They are just like us."

"Next", John called as he stood knee deep in the river.

They crowded along the edge of the water, waiting their turn, shuffling one by one: The homeless, the drunk driver, the stock broker, the business man, the adultress, the alcoholic, the arsonist, the thief.
"Next" stepped into the river in tattered cloths, next stepped into the river in their Armani suit, next stepped into the river, bottle still in hand, next stepped into the river with a broken heart, next stepped into the river rage dripping off his sleeves, next stepped into the river – a carpenter's son; and he also was baptized - one of them.

Public relations people would have surely told him otherwise if he had consulted them before beginning his ministry, "You side with them, but you do not admit to being one of them. A hand-shake, a smile, encouraging words by the shore, a helping hand to lead them out, but don't get in there with them."

What will people say?

Even if his intentions were good, it was ruinous to his reputation. Who would ever believe that he was there because he cared about those people and refused to separate himself from them? He just showed up and got in line.

You see the problem - guilt by association

A few weeks ago I had dinner with Susan Moore, Roy's wife, a delightful woman, a faithful Jew. She told me about a ritual in the synagogue that uplifts those who have lost a loved one over the past year. One by one people stand and say the name of the one they have lost. Susan watched for a long time, month after month as one by one people would stand and call out the name. Standing alone, grieving, remembering. Then one day she stood, compelled, she found her courage and stood.

"Who do you stand for?" Rabbi Silverman asked

"I stand for them", she replied, "I stand with them."

It is a profound moment. God joins our common lot. Not only does he say he is one of us, but in the midst of it, in the midst of shock and confusion, in the midst of what must have been mind boggling for John, a voice proclaimed him the Beloved.

He stood, knee deep in the waters of sin, waist deep in the mucky waters of all those sins floating at his feet, surrounded, by all of us and was called, the Beloved

Jesus throws his towel in with ours as we all step into the river together: the well ones and the hurt ones, the brave ones and the weak ones, the successful ones and the ones that can't seem to get anything right. We're all wrapped up together and whether we were carried in our mother's arms or arrived under our own steam, the day we were baptized we got into the river with Jesus and all his flawed kin; you know, the sinners – faulty, sorry, guilty, human beings, because we *are* them, and he was one of us.

Prayer for the Renewal of Baptism

We give you thanks, generous God and mother of all,
For by the gift of water you nourish and sustain all living things.
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God
Over the watery chaos, your Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.
Between a flood and a beautiful rainbow you saved people in the time of Noah
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God
Into the River Nile his mother placed baby Moses into a basket and was drawn into safety by Pharaoh's daughter and her Israelite maid
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God
Through the Red Sea, waves rescued your children from slavery.
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God
Gushing from the rock, water flowed into the mouths of the Israelites as they wandered through the desert
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God
In the waters of Mary's womb the Christ child was nurtured and from them was born as your good news.
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God
In the waters of the Jordan Jesus was baptized, joining our common lot and beginning his ministry among us.
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God
Jesus walked on the water to save his friends from drowning
Jesus offered living water to a woman by a Samaritan well.
In a basin of water, Jesus washed his disciple's feet, showing them how to serve one another
Response: We thank you. Blessed is our God

Blessing of Water

Pour out your Holy Spirit
That as we were joined with Christ
Through the waters of baptism,
We may proclaim
There is no longer slave or free,
There is no longer male or female
All are one in Christ Jesus,
We are all God's Beloved
Come for all is ready.
"You are a beloved child of God. In you, God is well pleased."

Blessing of Compassion / Benediction

Touching the forehead
May you approach all other beings with Christ-like compassion,
observing them with kindness, letting go of judgment.

Touching the ears
May you be aware of the suffering of those around you. May your ears be open to the cries of distress.

Touching mouth
May you have the courage and wisdom to speak up for those who are wronged.

Touching hands
May you be open to give and receive

Touching the heart
May you be willing to meet your own suffering. May you do so with compassion for yourself.

Touching feet
May your faith give you strength when you stand beneath the cross of another.

Hugging
May you also know the shelter and love of God. May you trust our compassionate God to protect you and comfort you. May you be at peace.

"You are a beloved child of God. In you, God is well pleased."
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