

## Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner

January 13, 2008

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, Year A

Matthew 3:13-23

It was early evening as we stood on the bank of Lake Whitney. The skies were overcast but the hot and humid mid-June air enveloped us. We all stood there, wearing our shorts and flip-flops, lake clothes—the baby’s father, Rusty and his mother, Tammy; Rusty’s brother Bob and his family; me, mom and Shalyn; and, a couple of elders from First Presbyterian Church in Waco. We all stood on the bank of murky Lake Whitney on a hot, summer evening. My father stood in a white robe, his arms wrapped around a curious and active one year old baby boy named Colt.

Dad turned and faced the family. “Rusty and Tammy, do you desire that Colt be baptized?” “Yes we do,” they said. “Relying on God’s grace, do you promise to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to your child?” “Yes we do,” they responded again. Their responses were quiet, almost lost in the sound of motorboats pulling in and out of the boat docks. But I understood why they spoke softly.

After all, we were standing on the banks of Lake Whitney at the marina that brothers Bob and Rusty owned together. And we were enough of a crowd that we had drawn a few onlookers who watched from a safe distance away. And besides all that, neither Bob, Rusty nor really anyone else in their family was very “church’y.” Truth be told, they had been pretty wild in their past and still carried a few of those habits into their present lives as family men. Here in worship, we will just say they were rather “earthy.”

My father had spent years with them at that marina, but for a long time, he did not tell them what he did for a living. When Dad was at the lake, he just wanted to be a fisherman. He did not want to be “the preacher.” But, Rusty and Bob eventually found out from one of Dad’s friends.

For a while after the discovery, they apologized every time they cursed and tried to hide their beers when he walked into the tackle shop. But, after a bit, they realized that Preacher Jimmie was still just Jimmie. They figured out that Dad’s vocation did not require them to censor themselves. Dad did not want them to be anyone other than who they were. So, they relaxed about it and things got back to normal at the Marina.

Well, sort of normal I suppose. Rusty and Bob had gone to church when they were kids but neither of them was active as an adult. The Marina was open 7 days a week, and besides, they said they were not really “church people.” They might go into Whitney for Christmas or Easter, but that was about it. Church just made them nervous. But once they found out that Jimmie was Preacher Jimmie, they did start to ask some questions. They asked a lot of questions about sin and forgiveness. They spent some time in confession, telling Dad about their past as they drank a coke near the live wells. They talked about Jesus, and the Spirit, and what Dad thought happened when you died and how the end might come about.

And Dad spent a whole lot of time helping them get reacquainted with God. He spent a whole lot of time helping them get past the God of their childhood—the one who smote you with lightning bolts, who frowned at your every move, who, like Santa, kept detailed lists of who was naughty and who was nice. He helped them

begin to say goodbye to that God they no longer believed in so they could get to know the God he saw in Christ Jesus—the God who knew them the best and yet loved them the most. The God who had forgiven them again and again, setting them free, even if they did not know it or realize it. The God who was 100% committed to being their God, even though they would never be able to be 100% committed to being disciples.

And after many months of conversation and questions, confession and assurance, beer and fishing, they grew to be close friends. Bob, Rusty and Preacher Jimmie. And Dad became not just their buddy, but also their pastor. He got to know and love the whole family, including the kids. When he was not in the boat or at the dock, he was up at the store visiting. And so, several years later when baby Colt was born into the world, it was natural for Rusty and Tammy to ask Dad about baptism.

Their childhood churches had preached that only believer baptism counted and so the idea of infant baptism was very new to them. But they were intrigued. They were intrigued by what Dad told them about his understanding, the Reformed Presbyterian understanding, of why we baptize. “Baptism is first and foremost about God choosing us in Jesus Christ,” he said. It is not about our choosing of God. Yes—that response is very important because when we are living in the light of our baptism, it changes everything about how we live our lives. But the meaning of your baptism rests first and foremost in who God is and God’s decision to claim us as God’s own through Jesus. It is less about your sin and much more about God’s grace.

Dad could have pointed to today’s Gospel lesson to help illustrate his point. John the Baptist was very passionately preaching baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He was very passionately emphasizing the repentance piece of baptism—the fact that our baptism signals a turning from sin and a turning to God. The fact that our baptism is an act of new birth, of new creation, of beginning again. All important components to this mysterious watery sacrament.

But then comes Jesus. Jesus, the Messiah, the one for whom John had prepared. Jesus, the one who had no need of repentance, or turning, or beginning again. And John knew this about Jesus. So he tried to stop him from lining up with all the others. He tried to stop him from going down into the murky Jordan. “No Jesus,” John protested. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” John could not get his head around it. He was the one who constantly missed the mark of being God’s child, not Jesus. He felt way too unworthy to baptize Jesus. It just did not make much sense.

But Jesus was not about to be talked out of it. He insisted it be done. “Do it John,” Jesus instructed. “This is what needs to be done in order to set things in motion, in order to fix what has become broken, in order to put creation back into right relationship with God. Do it John,” Jesus said. For Jesus knew that this fulfilling of righteousness was not something we could do for ourselves. He knew it was his call to do it for and with us. Furthermore, wasn’t this what incarnation was all about? The proclamation that God in Jesus was taking our side, not content to be separate from us, but desiring to join us, to be one with us in all that we are and in all that we do.

Perhaps that identification was the primary function of Jesus’ baptism—so that we would know at our own baptisms, at the baptisms that we witnessed, that Jesus himself had done this too. Jesus himself had stood in line, shoulder to shoulder with sinners like you and like me. Jesus himself had gone down into the murky waters to signal cleansing and forgiveness and new creation. Jesus was baptized that day precisely so he would be all of who we are so that we might become more like who he is. As our Book of Order puts it, “in baptism we participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection. In baptism, we die to what separates us from God and are raised to newness of life in Christ.”

Those are the kinds of things Dad told Rusty and Tammy. “You would be the ones to take promises on Colt’s behalf,” he said, “until Colt gets big enough to claim those promises for himself. Plus,” Dad continued, “remember that baptism is not the end of the journey. You don’t wait until you get it all perfectly right and until you are perfectly faithful to get baptized. You will never do it if you wait for that to happen! Baptism is the beginning of the journey. It will be the beginning of Colt’s journey. Every time you give Colt a bath, you can remind him of his baptism. Every time someone at school tries to tell him who he is and what he can or cannot do with his life, you can remind him of his baptism. You can remind him that he is first and foremost a child of God, brought into the body of Christ, claimed and sealed forever. If you feel called to have Colt baptized as a baby, you are deciding that you want him nurtured in the faith from his very beginning, a nurturing and a growing that will continue as long as he lives.”

Rusty and Tammy decided that was exactly what they wanted to do. They decided to trust that God really was as merciful and gracious as Jesus said. They decided to trust that baptism really was more about God’s decision for us rather than our decision for God. They decided make sure Colt knew from the very beginning of his memories that he was a beloved child of God. No matter what anybody else said about him, that was who he was. And so Dad received permission from First Pres’ Session to administer the sacrament and two elders volunteered to represent the congregation on the banks of Lake Whitney.

Sweat was beginning to drip down my back that humid summer evening at the marina. After asking Rusty and Tammy about their intentions, Dad then turned to all of us. “Do you, representing the whole body of Christ, promise to guide and nurture Colt by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his Church?” “We do!” we said enthusiastically, our voices carrying out over the water. Dad then asked Tammy and Rusty to profess their faith which they did, this time with a little more self-confidence in their voices.

Dad invited Rusty and Tammy to wade into the water as he carried Colt out into the gentle lapping of the lake’s waves. He got deep enough to where he could reach down and scoop up the water with his big hands. “Colt,” dad proclaimed, pouring the lake water onto that baby’s head, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Colt’s eyes were wide as Dad made the sign of the cross on his forehead declaring, “Colt, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

And with those words, tough old Rusty began to cry. And Colt saw his daddy crying, a sight he had never seen before, and he started to cry too. And then, above the baby’s wails, standing out in the murky waters of Lake Whitney, Rusty and Tammy began to laugh. And so did my father. And so did the bystanders watching from their safe distance. And so did the rest of us.

And at that moment, don’t you just know that God was joyful too. “This is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

And after everyone was dried off, we went up to the store for more laughter, more stories and ice cream—our rag-tag piece of the Body of Christ.