

## Out on a Limb

### Feast of the Baptism, Year C – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 13, 2013*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Y'all know how much I love telling stories. I hope you enjoy the ones I tell about my childhood, or about my boys, or about the weird way I sometimes look at the world. It was a real privilege sharing stories with you last week as part of my report to the Annual Meeting, stories about all the wonderful things that are going on at St. Paul's. I trust we will have many, many more of those stories to share over our years together. But I'm quite aware that that was *thirty minutes* of story-telling last week, so I figured today tone it down a bit – and just tell a couple of quick stories that may end up relating to today's celebration of the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord.

At one point yesterday afternoon, Jenny and I got out into the warm gray day to take care of a couple of errands. One of them took us to Big Lots out on 2nd where we were on the hunt for our favorite brand of teabags: Twinings' Earl Grey. I really like my cup of tea in the morning, right after my bowl of cholesterol-lowering oatmeal, and doctored with two sugars and some milk, but Jenny is the *real* tea-drinker in the relationship, usually going through two or three cups a day – perhaps you've seen her with her thermo-cup. Anyway, the best price we've ever found for our favorite blend is at the Big Lots, \$3 for 48 bags. I think Jenny was looking to score with a Big Lots stock-up buy, but this time they only had one box. We looked around a little more – they've really got a bunch of stuff out at the Big-Lots, you know – but we got to the counter with just our \$3 box of tea.

You'd think that would be about it, wouldn't you? Well, you'd be wrong. At the counter with our \$3 box of tea, the woman ringing up our not-so-big Big Lots purchase, asked if we were members of the Buzz Club rewards program and offered to get us started if we gave her an email address. Apparently I was insufficiently impressed with her invitation – I think my response was that I already *get* plenty of emails – so she kind of gruffly responded that membership in the Buzz Club was for *my* benefit not hers.

The second story is actually from right in our own parking lot. The last stop in our errand adventures was coming here to the church to check on the mail and to look in on the critters in my fish tank. We got back to the apartment just before the heavens opened and Skippy the Weatherman got all excited about his Doppler maps, but the gray skies were already starting to thicken up as we checked to make sure the door locked behind us and headed up the ramp. "Look at that birds' nest," Jenny said, pointing to one of the particularly gnarled arboreal specimens which has probably been growing out by Green Street since before any of us were born, "it's way out there at the end of that branch, right in the wind and the rain." I saw the precariously perched... perch she was talking about as she continued, "I think I'd have built it further back and further in, where it's safer." I gotta tell ya, I kinda agree.

I gotta tell ya something else, too. Since I was like ten, I have scratched my head about the event we celebrate today. Why on earth would Jesus go out into the wilderness to be baptized with this ritual cleansing of repentance and return? After all, if Jesus is who we say he is, this is the Son of God who was, as one of our Eucharistic prayers puts it, "in every way as we are, except without sin." This is the Savior of the world. This is Christ the Lord. This is the one who took the burden of our sins into his own sinless life, and put them to death on the Cross. Surely Jesus did not need a baptism of repentance to mark the beginning of his public life and ministry. So what is going on here in our Gospel reading this morning? What's going on out there at the edge of the wilderness?

Trust me, there are complex historical and theological responses to those questions. There are whole *books* full of responses. But we need only cut to the bottom line: in everything that we hear Jesus say, in everything we see Jesus do, in everything we know Jesus to *be*, God is telling us something about

himself, something about *our* selves, and, most *importantly*, something about the relationship *between* us. In everything that Jesus says, in everything Jesus does, in everything Jesus *is*, he is showing us how closely, how *intimately* God relates to the whole of humanity – to all of us who sin, to all of us who *need* to repent, to all of us who need to turn to him again and again and again. It's not for his benefit, it's for *ours*. Jesus stands in the Jordan River this morning, not for his benefit, but for *ours*. Jesus lay in that stable manger as a baby, not for his benefit, but for *ours*. Jesus hung on the hard, bloody wood of the Cross, not for his benefit, but for *ours*. Because God in Christ did not concern himself with the glories and splendor of heaven, but with the gritty, dirty reality of the world we have made of his creation. In his birth, in his life, in his *death*, God in Christ built his home *way* out on a limb, to identify himself with *us*. In *our* birth, in *our* life, in *our* death, God in Christ is, we say, "Emmanuel," "God with us." God *with* us, God *for* us, God *in* us, even, and most *especially* in our deepest need to be forgiven.

No, Jesus doesn't need to step out there into the wilderness to find redemption. But he does not hesitate for one *moment* to join the crowd of sinners at the River Jordan. Because Jesus was doing what God is *always* doing in Christ: standing *by* us, standing *with* us, standing *for* us – at the waters' edge... and at the very *tip* of the branch.