

The Journey Begins  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
Date: January 8, 2012

13:48

A story is told of a man who went to prison in a time of great economic turmoil for stealing a loaf of bread. He was forced to do hard labor to repay his debt to society and prison hardened him. Because of his crime, he was also forced to wear documentation pinned to his chest that specified he was a thief upon his eventual release and thus he wandered from town to town unable to find a job.

He finally came to a town with a kind bishop who took him in for the night and gave him a large meal served on the bishop's best silver. In sheer desperation, the man stole the bishop's silver in the middle of the night and hit the road. The next day, the bishop answered his door to see his former guest flanked by two policemen. The one officer laughed saying, "You wouldn't believe this guy's story, bishop. He actually told us that you GAVE him your silver to keep."

The bishop took in the whole scene and told the police that the man wasn't lying and that the bishop did indeed give his guest the silver, knowing that they were fine pieces and would allow him to sell them for a great deal of money. "But my son," the bishop remarked to the man, "You forgot the silver candlesticks when you left in such a hurry last night." The stunned police officers released the man and went back to their business, leaving the thief and the bishop alone.

With downcast eyes and a stunned look on his face, the man had no idea what to say to the bishop. For his part, the bishop eyed the man carefully and gently lifted his face so that they could look at each other. "My son," the bishop quietly said, "With this silver, I have bought your soul for God."<sup>[1]</sup>

Some of you may recognize this story from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserable*. In the book, Jean Valjean's life changes after this encounter with the bishop, it is the positive turning point in his life—he eventually becomes a mayor and a business owner. Valjean saves an orphan girl and raises her as his own daughter and spares the life of a police inspector who hunts him for years seeking vengeance. The bishop's moment of grace spoke deeply to this hardened man and his life was never the same.

I've always been intrigued by the concept of journeys, of venturing into the unknown, of blazing new trails and embarking on new paths in our lives. The story of Jean Valjean has always spoken to me because his moral and ethical journey exemplifies the light and dark within all of us. His story speaks to how we can struggle to do what's right in the face of adversity because life can be complicated, with success and failure and everything in between.

So it probably comes as no surprise that I often think of Jesus' life and ministry as a journey. And even Jesus was not immune to making difficult choices and receiving grace and mercy when he needed it. We don't really know what led Jesus to be baptized by John in the wilderness, the story we heard in our Gospel lesson for today. And Mark, characteristically, has a short and sweet account of Jesus' baptism. One line, really, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan."<sup>[2]</sup>

It's all rather strange when you think about it. Here's Jesus—the Son of God, Emmanuel, the Word made flesh, and he's in the desert getting baptized by his crazy apocalyptic prophet cousin who wears clothes made of camel hair and munches on locusts and honey. Jesus can't

baptize himself though and perhaps the quirky and fiery John was as good a traveling companion as any in this important moment in Jesus' life.

John does indeed baptize Jesus even though he tells his followers that he's not even "worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals" and we see that the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus as a dove.[3] If there was any doubt as to the identity of Jesus before his baptism, there certainly isn't now, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." [4]

Jesus gets claimed by God and affirmed as God's Son. It seems like a very happy ending to this brief story and a remarkable moment in the life of Jesus. In case he had any doubts before, Jesus now knows for certain that God is watching out for him and that he is and always will be beloved by God.

Of course, we all know that the story doesn't end there. Jesus' ministry will not be all descending symbols of peace and booming voices of affirmation and love coming from heaven. In the very next passage in Mark, Jesus gets driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit of God—the Spirit that just alighted on him and blessed him. Now this same Spirit is leading Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan . . .

That story is for another sermon, but it's interesting that this joyous moment of baptism, of being claimed, the promising start of an adventure doesn't last too long for Jesus. He doesn't have time to bask in the joy of his baptism because he has to immediately, as Mark says, face Satan and temptations before he begins his ministry.

It reminds me of Dr. Seuss' *Oh the Places You'll Go*, actually. There's a reason this is such a great book for graduates because it's all about journeys and the realities of what you will face. I've read it before on Graduation Sunday, but it's worth repeating. The book begins, "Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and away." [5]

And later, Dr. Seuss acknowledges that the journeys we take, the places we go, are not always happy. He writes, "I'm sorry to say so but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you. You can get all hung up in a prickly perch. And your gang will fly on. You'll be left in a Lurch. You'll come down from the Lurch with an unpleasant bump. And the chances are, then, that you'll be in a Slump. And when you're in a Slump, you're not in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done." [6]

That's the truth of journeys—you have the moments of glory and then the bang-ups and hang-ups along the way. In *Les Miserable*, when we see Jean Valjean have that moment of grace, we know that he's getting a second chance. He caught a break when the bishop vouched for him and yet we know deep down that his bang-ups are not over by any means. When we see Jesus getting baptized, we also know that his life is entering a new phase. This is a turning point for Jesus, one of the most definitive moments in his life and the first time we see God making a proclamation that Jesus is God's own Son and Beloved. But we know that Jesus' life won't be without bang-ups and hang-ups as well, and right after Jesus gets baptized he is already out there in the wilderness staring evil in the face.

When Jesus wades into the Jordan with John, his ministry is really only beginning. And the start of his ministry is poignantly marked by the sacrament of baptism. Now I'm guessing that most of us have probably seen several baptisms and we know that baptism is an outward and visible sign of the love of God, of joining the Church universal, and of being a beloved and unique individual within the context of a particular community of faith. This is the moment when we become part of a tradition that was in existence long before we were born and will be there long after we're gone.

Most of us were probably baptized as infants and therefore don't remember our baptisms. My parents told me a great story recently about a unique baptism they witnessed. There were two year-old triplets that were baptized in Wadsworth and the minister, who's my parent's minister and a good friend of mine, went to lay his hand on the third child and the young boy pushed the minister's hand away and yelled, "Don't do that!" Everyone in the congregation erupted in laughter as the last of these triplets was baptized, whether he was particularly thrilled about it or not.

But whether a child is angelic during a baptism or a handful and a bit resistant, whether we get baptized as adults or infants or anywhere in between, all of us are beloved children of God. And we all begin our journeys of faith and are declared members of the Church at our baptisms. We may not get the opening of the heavens and God declaring that we're beloved, and yet we have to know that we are.

Jesus journeyed from Bethlehem to Egypt to the Temple to the Jordan River with John to Galilee and the countryside and Jerusalem and eventually to the cross. And though we hear the story of Jesus' life year after year, there always seems to be parts of the story that we forget or that become more meaningful or parts that inspire us to reorient our lives or parts that give us hope and courage again and again.

Because that's the thing about making a journey, often it's not about the destination, it's about what happens along the way. It's about the people you meet and the lives that can transform you. It's about the privilege of knowing that you're a beloved child of God and that you're never alone on your travels. It's about the privilege of telling others about our own faith journeys and the journeys of Jesus Christ. Thankfully, our journey with Jesus begins anew year after year—and there's no telling what new paths we'll discover. As Dr. Seuss says, "Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So . . . get on your way!" Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*.

[2] Mark 1:9

[3] Mark 1:7

[4] Mark 1:11

[5] Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

[6] Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*