

Location, Location, Location

Matthew 3:1-17

Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese

January 11, 2015

Location, location, location. If you are in the market for a place to live, that is the song of the realtors. That has certainly been a factor for us both times we've bought a house. Thinking about work and school, and the proximity of those to where we lived was, and is, really important. Of course, the particular house is also a factor, but we limited our search to the neighbourhoods that were most convenient to the other factors.

And location is one of the images that has stayed with me this week related to this story.

Location #1: The Jordan River

Our story this morning takes place in and by the Jordan River. This wasn't just any river; this was the Jordan River, the place where the priests stood with the Ark of the Covenant to stop the waters so the Israelites could cross over into the Promised Land. It was river that Elijah and Elisha crossed moments before Elijah was taken up to heaven. This is where Elisha told Naaman to go and wash to be cured from his leprosy. King David crosses the Jordan with his army to go fight the Arameans. This is an ancient river where many central events in the life of Israel took place. This river holds memory and power for the Israelites, and those coming to John for baptism knew about these events. They carried these memories. They recounted these stories. This was not just any river. This was the Jordan River. (Jan Richardson, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2011/01/04/baptism-of-jesus-following-the-flow/>) And it was to this river that Jesus went to be baptized, also knowing the incredible power and history connected to it.

Water is a powerful thing. It has the power both to sustain life and to end life. Water washes us, it cleanses us, it sustains our bodies. We can swim and play in the water, it holds us up. But it can also capsize our boats, it can swamp us, it can drown us. Religiously, water is a symbol of cleansing and of

new life. In Judaism, ritual washings and cleansings are an important part of the life of faith. In Christianity, water baptizes us into new life with Christ. The image of immersion baptism is a powerful one; the person being baptized actually can't baptize themselves--they have to give themselves over to the one who is doing the baptizing. I wasn't baptized by immersion, so I don't have a personal experience of what that is like. But as a pastor who has baptized that way, it is a powerful thing to put someone under the water. There's the physicality of it--getting wet, holding the weight of the person--not dropping them. But there's also that final moment before they go completely under--when they think they've surely gone far enough, that requires a little more strength to meet their resistance, so they can go all the way under. The person being baptized must ultimately yield to the one baptizing--give up control, allow themselves to be put under the water.

Symbolically, it fits with the words of dying to the old self, and rising to the new life in Christ. The old is washed away as we yield to the waters--to death, for we don't know if we will emerge from those waters. It's like going under anesthesia--we place ourselves into the care of one who knows better, and trust we will wake on the other side.

Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Jesus, too, had to place himself into John's hands, to trust the hands that held him, to allow himself to be put under the waters. What does it mean to follow someone who has yielded to the waters of baptism?

Location #2: The story of 2 Churches

In the Eastern Church, Christmas ends with the visit of the Magi and the baptism of Jesus. Epiphany, which is celebrated on January 6, is the high point of Christmas, and this first Sunday after Epiphany closes the Christmas season.

While in the West we focus on December 25 and the coming of Jesus in the flesh, as a baby, the East focuses on Jesus coming as God, as divine. A key text for the manifestation of Jesus as divine is this story of the baptism of Jesus. Whereas we usually pair this text with Jesus' temptations in the

wilderness, the Eastern Church connects it to the birth of Jesus and the story of the Magi.

I've been intrigued this week, by the location of this text in these 2 parts of the church--the West and the East. It is located in the transition point between Jesus' birth and the visit of the Magi, and his time of testing and temptation in the wilderness. For both of these events, this story is important, for it identifies who Jesus is. In his baptism, he is named and blessed; he is given an identity--"This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." What is interesting is that in Mark and Luke's accounts of the baptism, God addresses Jesus directly--you are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased. But in Matthew, God addresses the witnesses to the baptism and tells them who Jesus is. This story tells Jesus who he is, yes, but in Matthew, more importantly, it tells **us** who Jesus is. This is a story of identification and identity.

When read as part of the other days of Christmas--Jesus' birth and Epiphany, we see the connection between these 3 stories and how they each identify Jesus in their own way. With the birth, the newborn Jesus is identified by the shepherds, the despised and lowly of society, as the one who is made known to outcasts. We have this idyllic picture of shepherds, but in biblical times, others did not like to associate with them. This baby evokes songs of praise and adoration from these same despised ones. Those who are the despised of the world see in this baby One who is worthy of praise and profess faith in this newborn. Jesus' birth, as a baby born of a woman, identifies him as one of us; this is a human baby with physical needs for food, nurture and shelter. The birth story gives us both the vulnerable human Jesus, and the Jesus who brings the outcasts to him.

The Magi were foreigners and Gentiles; artists depict them of differing ages and nationalities, and while the text gives us no such details, it is consistent with the message of the NT, and the essence of the gospel that Christ came for all people. In the story of the Magi, Jesus is identified as the Messiah for all people.

With Jesus' baptism, there is the obvious identification of him as the Son of God. But those present would also have heard echoes of Genesis and the

creation story, the flood and the Exodus, because of the presence of water, the voice and the dove. Not only is Jesus being identified as the Son of God, but he is inaugurating a new creation; he is the new Noah, bringing a new covenant of grace and promise; and he is the new Moses, bringing freedom and liberation. (Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's time for the Church*, p. 112-114) In locating this story with Jesus' birth and the visit of the Magi, it identifies to us who Jesus is--both divine and human.

Locating this story in connection to Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, also gives us an important piece of identification. For Jesus, knowing who he was, being named and blessed as the Son of God, would have strengthened him to meet the temptations and challenges of 40 days of fasting in the wilderness. When we face difficult times, challenges, trials and temptations, knowing who we are, clinging to our identity, particularly as children of God, is so very important. Knowing who we are gives us a place to stand; a solid foundation; or using the water image, knowing who we are gives us an anchor in stormy seas, or the lifejacket or lifeboat that keeps us from going under.

Location #3: Calendars and time.

According to our calendars, Christmas is over. We returned to work and school this week, or at least we tried to. The Christmas decorations have probably mostly come down, although the lights look so nice now with the arrival of snow. The Christmas presents are long opened and put away.

With today's text, we move from the high holy season of Advent and Christmas, to the liturgical season of 'ordinary time'. If we were high church, the colours of the clothes on the altar and pulpit would have changed from the purple of Advent and Christmas, to the green of ordinary time.

There's something about those high holy days--the holidays--that is exciting and special. The change in routine brings renewed energy and renewal. We have opportunities, or take the time, to see family and friends that doesn't happen sometimes outside of these times. There are days off from work and school, allowing time for these extra things.

Of course, the holy days, the holidays, also bring with them a whole raft of expectations and extra work, which make them challenging and exhausting. The reality is that we cannot live all the time in the high holy times. That level of excitement and energy can't be sustained. We also place expectations on these times for good, quality family time, but these expectations don't always match reality, and so the holidays can become difficult and disappointing, highlighting tensions in a way that day to day life conceals.

As these holy days end, we may find ourselves breathing a sigh of relief that they are over, welcoming once again the routine that is work and school. We are entering the liturgical season of "ordinary time", and the challenge of this time is not to see it as boring, or inferior to the holy days, but to see this time as real. It is in reality, a good part of the year. It is in ordinary time--a term that refers liturgically to the ordinal placement of the Sundays, not the quality of the Sundays--the first Sunday after Epiphany, the second Sunday after Easter, etc.--that we make sense of the holy days. It is as we re-enter our normal routines that we can reflect on the meaning of Jesus' birth for our own lives. In what ways has Jesus come to us? To me? How do I experience God in the flesh every day? Today? In the office? In the classroom? Joan Chittister says that ordinary time "keeps us rooted in the great, driving truths of the faith: Jesus was, Jesus is, and Jesus will come again." (*The Liturgical Year*, p. 99) When we understand the birth of Jesus in our own lives, then we begin to see the impact of it, and the implications for our own life of faith. We see what it "demands of us in our ordinary lives." (p. 99)

Chittister also says that "it is what we do routinely--in our ordinary daily lives--not what we do rarely--in the holy days--that delineates and shapes the character of a person...It is simply the continuous, faithful, weekly attention to what it means to live out daily what we say we believe when we're at those mountaintop moments of the spiritual life...Ordinary time is the period when we determine how we will act, given that we now see the world through the eyes of Jesus." (p. 183)

Conclusion

Each of these 3 locations--the Jordan River, the story of 2 Churches, and calendars and time--has implications for identity.

Location shapes identity. When we were deciding between 2 neighbourhoods here in Goshen, and could see the benefits and drawbacks of each neighbourhood, someone said, "Who will you be in each place? Does where you live affect who you are? Or how will it affect who you are, or who you want to be?" This was an intriguing question, and one I've thought about since. Where we live impacts who we are and the decisions we make around lifestyle, transportation, stewardship of resources, size of house.

The location of Jesus' baptism shaped and confirmed his identity. It connected him to the story of God and God's people that had been lived and recounted for centuries. Jesus was a continuation of God's story; in fact, Jesus was the incarnation, the embodiment of God and God's story, and in going to the Jordan River to be baptized, he placed himself firmly in that story. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, with all of its history and significance, identified him with the story of God's people.

The location of this story in connection with Jesus' birth and the Magi, firmly connects him to the mission of God in redeeming the world, including the outcasts, and saving all people. It identifies him with God's mission in the world.

The location of this story in our calendars, in the transition between the high holy times and the ordinary times, allows us to continue to ponder the meaning of the coming of Jesus, both as human and divine, into our world, and into our lives. The location of this story at this time of the year, invites us into a new year of identifying ourselves as people called and named by God, as people who are continuing the story of God at work in the world. As we year after year, recount the story of Jesus' birth, the coming of the Magi, and the baptism of Jesus, we take deeper and deeper within ourselves what it means to follow this One who was human as we are--who knew what it was like to be tempted and to suffer, but whose divinity lifts us up and redeems us--takes us beyond ourselves and places our sufferings and trials into a bigger reality, a bigger story.

At the start of this new year, where are you located? How do you identify yourself? Perhaps you haven't yet located yourself in this story of God. If

you'd like to explore what it might mean to place yourself into this story, to explore the waters of baptism, please talk to me or Dan.

The location of this story, between the 2 high holy seasons in the life of the church--Jesus' birth and his death and resurrection--gives us time to absorb the meaning of Jesus coming in the flesh and as Son of God. This is the rhythm of the church year; this is the rhythm of our lives--birth and death and new life. And in between those times, we absorb into our very beings what it means to be located in this time and place, what it means to follow One who is both human and divine; what it means to be named and blessed by God. May all of our ordinary days be filled with the extraordinary presence of our God.