

Humble Hearts, Heavenly Eyes, Helping Hands
Luke 3:15-22
January 13, 2013

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison. When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

In his book entitled simply *Prayers*, Michel Quoist pens these words: "Lord, I would like to rise very high above my city, above my place, above my time. Lord, I would like to borrow your eyes."

There is a profound difference between the way things look through sinful human eyes and the way they look through the eyes of Jesus. People tend to look at outward appearances as they make their judgments and form their values. We are impressed by people who occupy positions of prestige and power. Pomp and ceremony, wealth and possession lure us in.

How different things and people look when we see them through heavenly eyes. God seeks out the simple, the humble, both things and people, to accomplish his purposes. We saw that once more this past Christmas. The way of the world is to celebrate in a noisy, glitzy, and glamorous fashion. God's way is so different! A Christmas hymn says it well: *How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given, but God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.*

God is looking for a special kind of people to give him a helping hand that will make a difference for good in this world. Where does he look? Among the movers and shakers of the world? The haughty, the high, and the mighty? No. God says: *To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit* (Is 66:2 KJV). We pray that God will move through his Word today to give us humble hearts, heavenly eyes, and helping hands.

Picture the Jordan River in your mind. It's not much to look at – all muddy and nasty. It's not impressive to human eyes. In the book of 2 Kings, we read about Naaman the Leper's response when told to go bathe seven times in the Jordan: *Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?* (2 Ki 5:12 NIV).

Yet, Jesus went out to be baptized in the Jordan. To human eyes, Jesus didn't look very

impressive either. Isaiah the prophet wrote: “*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him*” (Is 53:2 NIV). Bethlehem, his place of birth, was unimpressive. His home town was a humble place. The disciple Nathanael said: “*Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?*” (Jn 1:46 NIV). Jesus came from a humble family. Someone once asked: “*Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?*” (Mt 13:55 NIV). Seen with human eyes, at the beginning of his ministry there was nothing about Jesus to impress people.

But John saw Jesus with different eyes. When Jesus asked for baptism, John tried to refuse. Why? John was looking at himself with a humble heart. He said, “*I need to be baptized by you*” (Mt 3:14 NIV).

John saw more than what met the eye; he saw the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sin of the world. He saw the one for whom he had come to prepare the way. He knew the man standing before him, asking to be baptized, was the one to come after him – the one who was greater than himself.

John did what Jesus requested, but that raises a question. Why did Jesus come to be baptized? Why did the sinless one want to take part in a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins?

Jesus gives the answer: *It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness* (Mt 3:15 NIV). This was part of God’s plan. John saw it and didn’t argue. He did what Jesus asked; he obeyed. John used his hands to help God fulfill his plan.

What magnificent results that brought. Heaven opened. God gave John and Jesus eyes to see things that eyes don’t usually see, and ears to hear things that ears don’t usually hear. *You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.* (Lk 3:22 NIV). From that humble beginning, Jesus began his ministry: seeking and saving the lost.

Now let’s picture our trip to the baptismal font – parents and sponsors standing there, and the pastor reading from God’s Word. To human eyes this is a simple, unimpressive thing. People wrestle with the meaning and purpose of baptism. What good can be accomplished by such a simple act?

For the answer, we turn to Luther’s Small Catechism. *What are the blessings of Baptism? “It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this!”*

The answer begs two human questions. Who says so? How can this be? The answer: God, who said *This is my beloved Son*, gives baptism its power. He doesn’t ask us to understand it, to evaluate it scientifically, or dissect it. He tells us to do it, to act in faith. That’s what Naaman finally did, and look at the result. He was healed of his leprosy, and brought to faith in the Lord God of Israel.

It’s the same for us. God puts his name and claim upon us, and creates saving faith in our hearts. We are baptized into his name, adopted into the heavenly family. By grace

we become sons and daughters of the heavenly Father. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine* (Is 43:1 ESV).

All of the blessings which Jesus purchased through his life, death, and resurrection are offered to us in the humble, simple beginning called baptism. That promise is not founded on the word of a man; it is founded on the Word of God.

Each day, the Christian goes back to his or her baptism. We remember with a humble heart who and what we are by nature. God wants that from us: *To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit* (Is 66:2 KJV). We never outgrow our need to know that we are forgiven. As we daily remember our baptism, we claim its promise and power. We hear God say: *You are my beloved child*. God gives us our identity. It is there he declares that we are his people and that he has work for us to do.

In order to make his catechumens at Antioch realize the importance of responding to their baptism, John Chrysostom explained it to them in simple language: “We have all signed a treaty with Christ, not with ink but with the Spirit, not with the pen but with our confession of faith. We have confessed the sovereignty of God and rejected the tyranny of the devil. There you have the signature, the agreement, the contract.”

Then he had each catechumen turn first to the west and say, “I detach myself from you, Satan, from your pomp, your worship, and your angels.” Then, they would turn toward the east and add, “And I attach myself to you, O Christ.” Such a daily commitment from us could be very valuable as we remember each day that Christ has made us his own.

Jesus walked away from the Jordan to begin his ministry. Today, he calls on those who have been baptized in his name to go out into the world, to look at things and people through his eyes. How different life looks when we do!

At first, the disciples saw little children as an unnecessary nuisance; but Jesus taught them to see children as people of God's kingdom. We can look at people as problems to be avoided, or as opportunities for ministry in the name of Jesus. All around us there are opportunities to serve our Lord by reaching out to help people. We can see those openings if we look at life through heavenly eyes.

An executive for a large American charitable organization traveled to Africa during a time of famine. The hollow, haunting eyes and the distended stomachs produced by severe malnutrition and advanced stages of starvation weighed heavily on his mind and heart.

Finally, the time came for him to return home. He went out to a landing strip to board a small plane which would take him to a larger city, where he would catch the jet for home. A woman met him at the air strip, holding a small child in her hands. She pleaded with him, “Sir, take my baby with you. If he stays here, he will die. If he goes with you, he can live.”

The man was deeply moved, but knew he couldn't take the child with him. So he boarded the small plane, and as it taxied away, he looked over his shoulder and saw the woman holding the child in her arms, pleading in her eyes.

As he flew home aboard a comfortable jet, he reflected on who that child was, and why his heart was torn. That child was one of the little children that Jesus invites to come to himself – a child for whom Jesus died, a child who would be lost forever without Jesus.

It is Jesus who beckons to us to minister in his name to the hurting, the hungry, the helpless, the needy of this world, and the lost of this world, that they too might believe in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and so be saved. Jesus says: *I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me* (Mt 25:35-36 NIV).

Let us pray. Lord, first give us humble hearts and heavenly eyes. And then, Lord, give us helping hands to minister in your name. Amen.