

January 10, 2010
Luke 3:21-22

Rev. Beth Robey Hyde

Beloved, Blessed, Beginning

Each week, I read items from a couple of people who often speak to my spirit, offering thoughts about faith and life for me to ponder. This week, it happened that two different writers addressed the same question: why do we go to church?

One of them admitted that he mostly goes to church because he was raised in the church, he has always been involved in church life and finds his friends among church goers. Habit, mostly, he admitted, as well as a common affirmation that faith matters, even though there is not widespread agreement about the content of their faith among his church community. And, he says, one more thing. Going to church reminds him that he isn't all there is. As I have sometimes put it, life isn't all about me.

In contrast, Ron Buford, the shaper of the UCC's God is Still Speaking movement, offers the paradoxical opposite perspective that it IS "all about me." About each of us. Ron wrote this:

When I was in high school, Ralph Waldo Emerson blew into my life and took my breath away. His essay on self-reliance says a lot more about my life values than I'd care to admit. And yet, there are things we simply cannot do alone; that is what church is all about. It's not about obligation, pleasing some temperamental deity, or the inspiring sermons, music and liturgy.

It's about something we often take for granted . . . the miracle that happens when God's diverse children gather, filled with expectation that God might show up to trouble the waters of our hearts and minds, filling our bellies with the unquenchable fire we need to get through another week, inspiring new ideas and action, gently descending upon us like an unexpected dove.

Beneath the collective and secret longings of people pretending that everything is okay, lie the real and hidden hopes of longing people. God, like a knowing lover, gently turns the doorknob of our longing hearts, awakening them to quiver within us.

Many leave worship thinking and feeling nothing happened. But the open and expectant leave with new power and courage to do things they never thought possible.

Amid the ascending hopes of people and the descending power of God, we publicly baptize our sons and daughters just as Jesus was baptized—among neighbors and friends, into community. In the presence of God, the living and the dead, saints past, present and future, we claim their lives and reclaim our own for hope, sealed with our unbreakable promise to love them and be loved . . . no matter what.

Sometimes I agree with the other writer I spoke of, that we go to church despite the things we DON'T believe: we don't believe that any church is perfect; that God only claims people who subscribe to the right dogma; that God leaps down from somewhere to determine the outcome of football games; that the prayers of some people are answered at the expense of others, that hurricanes and plagues are punishment for sins.

And yet, he says we know there is something more; whether we can name it or not. So we come, partly out of habit, partly out of friendship, partly from enjoyment of worship, but also in hope of touching that unnameable mystery.

But always there is tugging at *my* soul this experience of God as personal and as knowable, in the way that we know the hearts of those we love. No, it's not all about me, but it *is* distinctly about me. And you.

So I ask you, why do you come to church? Underneath our UCC determination that we don't have an exclusive claim on God, and behind our obsession with freedom of belief, I think that each of us, like Ron Buford claims, is longing for God to reveal Godself to us in a way we can feel, to touch us into hopefulness, to hold us in a way that makes us know that we are claimed, confirmed and called. That we are beloved, blessed and beginning anew each moment of our lives.

Jesus' baptism signaled, among other things, his solidarity with all other God lovers, the beginning of his ministry of compassion for people and confrontation of injustice, and, most clearly, his recognition of God's loving claim on him. Ours does the same. Whether we were baptized as infants, children or adults, whether by pouring or sprinkling or immersion, in anticipation of or in confirmation of our own profession of faith, somehow God has laid claim on us and proclaimed each person beloved. Somehow the community of faith has taken us in and nourished us.

On this one day, let each of us leave knowing that something has happened. God is waiting for each of us, calling each of us, speaking to each of us, naming us Beloved.

In the next few minutes, let us recall our baptisms as we perhaps feel the touch of a droplet of water in the ritual of remembrance.

Blessing of the Water

Let us pray:

We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight.

In the time of Noah, you washed the earth with the waters of the flood, and your ark of salvation bore a new beginning.

In the time of Moses, your people Israel passed through the Red Sea waters from slavery to freedom and crossed the flowing Jordan to enter the promised land.

In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus who was nurtured in the water of Mary's womb. At the river, your Child was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit.

By the baptism of Jesus' death and resurrection you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live with you.

Bless the tranquil and turbulent waters of our lives.
Bless the hopeful and engaging waters of our lives.
Bless the transforming waters of our lives.

Join me in praying the words in your bulletin:

Pour out your Holy Spirit, the power of your living Word, on these waters and on us gathered here, that we who have been immersed in the waters of Baptism may remember our new life in Christ and commit ourselves once again to the promises we have made in the Sacrament of Baptism. To you be given honor and praise through Jesus Christ our Lord, in unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen