

“Blessed Be the Tie That Binds”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

After all that John says about the Messiah— our expectations are pretty high. The people already had high expectations because of what JOHN was doing. They wondered if he might be the messiah. He said, “No, no, no. Just wait! I baptize you with water but the one coming after me— baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. He threshes and cleans the husk from the wheat. He hops buildings in a single bound. He charges your iPhone with a single touch.” (OK, I made up that last part!)

John is the one who points us to the presence of God in Jesus. He is the one that raises the expectations of Jesus. How would you feel if you were Jesus in that moment? John’s going on and on — “I mean this guy is so special I won’t even untie his sandals straps. You should see what he can do with loaves and fishes.” And Jesus is all, “Thanks, John. Uh right. Cool it. It’s not like I turn water into wine... yet.” The expectations for the messiah are growing and he hasn’t even started his ministry yet. From the very

beginning Jesus shows us what kind of messiah he will be. Before he takes on all the glory of being THE messiah, he stands in line to be baptized with the people.

In the first Harry Potter book we are introduced to the hero of the story— the 11 year-old wizard who didn’t know he’s a famous wizard until his 11th birthday. He’s getting used to his newfound fame in the wizarding world as ‘the boy who lived.’ Harry survived a killing curse from a notorious evil wizard when he was just a baby. Now, everyone knows him. It’s his first year; he hasn’t made any friends yet. He’s trying to figure out his place.

We don’t know much about Harry yet, but we learn a lot quickly. They were learning to ride broomsticks in class. A few of his classmates are nervous about flying on a broomstick— who could blame them. Neville Longbottom was nervous from the start. He was nervous about flying and nervous about being left behind. So he pushed off the ground hard before the teacher blew the whistle.

Neville shot into the air like a cork from a bottle— twelve feet— twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and — WHAM — a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay face down on the grass. A broken wrist. He was lucky. The teacher took Neville with his tear-stained face off to get help. The teacher demanded that no one move until she returned— leave those broomsticks where they are or else you will be expelled.

As soon as they were gone Draco Malfoy spoke up— making fun of Neville and calling him a crybaby. Malfoy even grabbed Neville’s stuff — a present from his grandmother. He grabbed it and began boasting to the class, “It’s that stupid thing Longbottom’s gran sent him.”

Here’s where we begin to see Harry’s character. He says quietly, “Give that here, Malfoy.” Everyone stopped to watch. Malfoy smiled and says, “I think I’ll leave it somewhere for him to find—up a tree?” “Give it here!” Harry yells. But, Malfoy leapt onto his broomstick and took off. He began taunting Harry from up above the towering treetops, “Come and get

it, Potter!” Harry grabbed his broom and despite his friends telling him not to disobey the teacher’s instructions, he kicked up off the ground. He was a natural— zooming up to face Malfoy far above their classmates on the ground. “Give it here or I’ll knock you off your broom.” And sensing that he was in trouble, that bully Malfoy quit. He threw Neville’s gift up in the air. Harry saw it rise and dove down to catch it before it hit the ground.¹

And in this one scene early on in this series of 7 books we learn something about Harry. It’s not just that’s he’s really good on a broom. He’s going to stick up for those who can’t stick up for themselves. He’s not going to let people be bullied. Even though he is “the boy who lived” and famous throughout the wizarding world he will cast his lot with his friends, with those who need him.

We are still getting introduced to Jesus here in Luke 3. From the beginning of Luke’s gospel we are learning what is important to Jesus. John is calling people to a fresh start through baptism and repentance. Did Jesus need John’s baptism of repentance? What about Jesus being sinless?

This is where our rational minds go crazy trying to figure out how the eternal squeezes into a historical human. The characteristics we think of as divine are the opposite of us. The three O's— omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent. Most of us know we aren't all knowing, all present everywhere, and all powerful. Soren Kierkegaard called this the "scandal of particularity". The fact that God became human and lived an earthly life is offensive to our pious vision of God. We bubble wrap God in the three O's — omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent. We protect our vision of God with clouds, harps, cherubim and holiness. God is holy we are not; therefore, we have some separation from that holiness. We are only human. But, wait— the Son came down. God came to live with us in human flesh. Jesus is expanding our vision of the divine— beyond the 3 O's. We have to change our minds. We have to accept that God came to live a regular life as a peasant contractor in a small village in Palestine. He wasn't king. He wasn't an emperor. He was just a guy in a village. And yet, his life changed everything. That's the scandal— that his life mattered. And because his life mattered for the life of the world

and changed history— there is hope that ours can matter too. The 'scandal' is this: by coming as a normal guy God wasted God's life. But, the incarnation says that's garbage. We say things like, "We're only human." As a cover for our mistakes. Luke is reminding us that we are human. We have incredible powers because we are human. God became human. And we share in his life now because he shared in ours. In addition, all humans share a common ancestor.

Some of us are reading through the bible this year— Genesis to Revelation. Many who do this end up getting lost where— the laws? The genealogies? Well, right after Jesus' baptism comes the start of his ministry but before his ministry gets going, before he goes to the wilderness, Luke gives us a genealogy. Jesus son of Joseph son of Heli son of so-and-so and on and on it goes— son of David son of Jesse— son of Boaz— son of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham. But, it doesn't stop at Abraham like in the gospel of Matthew. It keeps going further back— son of Noah, Methuselah, Enoch. Son of Enos son of Seth son of Adam and finally— son of God. Jesus is the

son of God... and reminds us of our common heritage.

Jesus comes to us in a long line of human history— a history that we share with him and with each other. He shares our DNA and reminds us we share 99.9% of our DNA with every other human. Genome variations in humans vary so slightly it's almost unrecognizable if you were simply reading the DNA. If the genome were a book, every person's book would contain the same paragraphs and chapters, arranged in the same order. Each book would tell more or less the same story. But my book might contain a typo on page 303 that yours lacks, and your book might use a British spelling on page 135 —"colour"—where mine uses the American spelling—"color."² We are all made of the same stuff. The incarnation of God in Jesus reminds us of our common ancestry and it reminds us that every life matters. And each of us is endowed (not just with inalienable rights but) with creative world-shaping gifts.

But, we don't get to start the story at the beginning. We pick up in the middle of things. We get in line behind others in history. We stand

on their shoulders for better or worse. And Jesus was no different. He came after John. People thought John was the messiah... Jesus was standing right there and they looked to John. They were looking for a fresh start. John offered them the opportunity to enter the waters again... start over. Start from here.

Why was Jesus baptized when he is supposed to be sinless? Solidarity and kinship. He was joining in and standing by those who could not stand up for themselves. And he was joining the family that cares for each other. In the waters of baptism we bind ourselves to life with God. In Jesus' baptism God is binding God's self to us. Why is the story of Jesus' baptism followed by a genealogy? Because baptism and genealogies are about kinship. The waters remind us of the great ocean we are a part of— the great family of God we are welcomed into. In Christ the God of all creation has come to walk with us, stand up for us, and sit with us in suffering and celebration. In baptism the ties of kinship are created. And that blessed tie can never be broken.

Conrad Navarro was a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force for forty years. He told me a story a few months ago about his time in Chaplaincy training (AKA- CPE). Back in the mid-80s he worked on the seventh floor at Wilfred Hall. The 7th floor is where the AIDs patients were cared for at the time. In the 1980s AIDs was a mysterious disease and it's victims were maligned and forgotten, sometimes they still are today. Conrad volunteered to work the 7th floor. And he said as soon as he let his patients know that he was baptist he would be tested. They wanted to see if he was there to care for them and walk with them through the valley of the shadow of death or was he there to claim some spiritual victory unconnected to the body in front of him. One day he met with an old woman from Puerto Rico. Conrad and his wife Nilda were born in Cuba. So he and this woman talked about their island heritage and some of the things they miss. They talked about the strong caribbean coffee. Conrad told her his wife could make Cuban coffee for them the next morning. So the next morning Conrad brought a thermos of coffee with 2 mugs. He poured a cup for her and a cup for himself. She tasted her cup and said, "MMM, this is delicious. Here

try mine." And she handed him her cup. It was a test. Will he drink from her cup? Will he faithfully touch the wounds in front of him or will he fall into the unfounded fears of AIDs that have no basis reality? Conrad took the cup and took a sip.

He knew in his mind that drinking after someone with AIDs doesn't give you AIDs. But, there's a difference between thinking and believing. Between believing and acting. Between doubting and loving. Between safe-distance and solidarity. Maybe today we can muster enough courage to get in line with Jesus. I think you know where to find him.

¹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, (Scholastic Press, Mexico: 1997) 147-149.

² http://www.genomenetwork.org/resources/whats_a_genome/Chp4_1.shtml