

TO THE WIND

LUKE 3: 15-17; 21-22

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In the course of any season of ministry, a pastor is called to serve in some extremely difficult situations which often affect people in extreme fashion: birth, illness, loss, disease, divorce, betrayal, sexual problems and, of course, death. My youngest brother, the Reverend Edward Petty Winkler, is a Methodist pastor in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and he was telling me recently about a funeral at which he officiated—the funeral of a man who had been murdered, repeatedly stabbed in an amphetamine deal that had gone bad.

The Shenandoah Valley was settled in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by Calvinists of various stripes—from Scotland, Switzerland, Germany, France and England. The Valley is very beautiful and fruitful, situated between mountain ranges and hospitable to farmers who have plied their trade for generations. Many of those Calvinists have distorted the very sophisticated theology of the man whose theology they have supposedly adopted. They confuse predestination—the idea that God chooses and directs whom God will—with fatalism—that whatever happens is supposed to happen.

So, when Ed was standing at the graveside of the murdered man in Front Royal, Virginia, someone remarked, “Well, when your time comes, that’s it. There’s nothing you can do about it. When God decides your time is up, he takes you.” A thorough-going Wesleyan, my brother desisted from strangling the man. Instead, he quietly remarked, “Don’t blame this on God. This is not God’s will. This is the result of human sin.”

The world seeks a kind of spiritual narcotization, an easy answer to problems of life and death. Grace is not cheap. It is costly, and we cheapen God’s will by turning it into a kind of *comme ci, comme ça*. Helmut Thielicke told years ago about riding in a taxi when the driver said, “I have heard that you are a theologian.” When Thielicke affirmed that he was, the man went on to say, “I’m not a Christian. I really believe in paganism.” Whereupon the theologian asked him, “Where, then, do you have your mascot doll hanging?”

“No,” the driver replied, “I don’t have one in the cab, but I do have a moneybag over there in the glove compartment. That’s my talisman. Why do you bring this up?”

Thielicke challenged the driver. “You don’t like to drive on Fridays and furthermore you’re quite miserable if you have to start out on the thirteenth. You are also interested in astrology, and I would be willing to bet that more than once you’ve had you’ve had your horoscope cast.”

“How do you know all this?” the startled driver asked.

“Oh, I know my neopagans well,” replied Thielicke. “People are very uneasy in a world without God; that’s why they need all this stuff. One might say that you have no peace; that’s why you resort to talismans and incantations and try to figure out your fortune by means of a horoscope.”

“You must not think that I despise the church. I tried Christianity once too, just because it says something about *peace*.”

When Dr. Thielicke asked the man what made him give up on the church, he replied, “It was simply because I can’t take this stuff about Christ. I don’t understand how anybody can believe in a God-man. How do you know all this stuff the Bible says is true? For those who can believe it, O.K. But as far as I’m concerned, I can’t believe it.”

According to Luke’s depiction of the baptism of this “God-man,” Jesus comes to the Jordan River and stands in line with all the other people waiting to be baptized. I like that image. Luke marks the beginning of Our Lord’s ministry not by describing it but merely reporting it in one-half of one verse: “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too” (Luke 3:21a, NIV).

John the Baptist has been preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Obviously, Jesus is not waiting to be baptized in response to such preaching. Jesus presents himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinners. He simply gets in line with everyone who has been broken by the “wear and tear” of this selfish world and had all but given up on themselves and, like Helmut Thielicke’s cab driver, on God.

Luke, in fact, doesn’t put a lot of emphasis on the baptism itself. He does not focus on the scene until Jesus has already been baptized. The first main clause of the text is “The heavens were opened,” and it is here that Luke’s principal affirmation begins. He does not show the reader the actual baptism of Jesus, but only the events after “all the people,” including Jesus, have been baptized.

It is no wonder then that the Church has long understood the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism as Epiphany texts, that is, as proclamations of God’s Christ to the world.

Notice the reference to Jesus praying (v. 21). The prayer life of Jesus is very important in Luke. Jesus is presented very often in prayer, and especially at critical moments in his life. Throughout his Gospel, Luke shows us Jesus praying. He prays before he calls the Twelve (6:12), before asking them who he is (9:18), before teaching the disciples how to pray (11:1), on the night of his arrest (22:41), and at his death (23:46). For Luke, what is characteristic of Jesus will also be characteristic of the church. All through the Book of Acts, the church prays regularly and fervently.

One problem you and I have with prayer is that we make it a *pious form* and not a *vital transaction*. As Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote in his classic study, *The Meaning of Prayer*, “We begin by trying to pray and end up saying prayers.” Vital prayer is first of all a vital and sustaining friendship with a God who cares for every one of us.

My definition of prayer goes back to the ancient understanding: “Grace to help us in time of need.” If there is anything in life that I believe, it is the reality of prayer based on the personal love of God.

So many people in the church are true to George Eliot's description of Hetty in *Adam Bede*: "Hetty was one of those numerous people who have had god-fathers and god-mothers, learned their catechism, been confirmed, and gone to church every Sunday, and yet for any practical result of strength in life, or trust in death, have never appropriated a single Christian idea or Christian feeling."

Prayer is not something we do in order to keep on good terms with God. It is not an appliance which we turn on or off. Prayer cannot be founded on fear or used as a form of protection. And, most of all, prayer is not a "good work" in return for which a blessing is given. Prayer at its deepest rests on the assurance that God really does care and God really does want the best for us. And nowhere is that more evident than in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the way he prays.

Do you remember James Weldon Johnson's depiction of the African American preacher's prayer in *God's Trombones* in which the pastor calls the church to bend toward God for its strength?

O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body bent
Before thy throne of grace.
O Lord, this morning
Bow our hearts beneath our knees
And our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning
Like empty pitchers to a fountain full.

Jesus identifies with us in his baptism. Like us, he is claimed by God. The Provision Theatre Company recently produced their version of Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Gospel*. One of Chicago's fine actors, Lou Contey played God. Not a bad role if you can get it. He stood on the back of a beat-up old Ford pickup on the stage. The equally fine actor, Tim Gregory playing a recently immersed Jesus stood below him looking up with hope and perhaps a little bit of anxiety in his eyes. But he need not have worried. God speaks in a loud voice, loud enough to echo all over the UIC campus: "You are my boy, Jesus. I am so proud of you!"

When we were baptized, our name was called, because the faith of the church is that God gave to each of us an identity, an individuality, a name and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. Our existence has its origin not in the accidents of history or biology but in the will and the intention of Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth.

To Christians who pray faithfully, believe joyfully and love ardently, Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of everything in their lives. But, truth to tell, for too many of us far from being the first and the last word, Christ is, at best, *an additional word*. It is not the preacher's job to tell you

what to do, but only to remind you of who you are: those who have been baptized and therefore commissioned to serve Christ in the world, to live as “good stewards of God’s grace.” As Peter wrote his fellow Christians: “As each as received a gift, employ it for one another....whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified.”

In this season in which we live—a time of job loss, home loss, identity loss on the one hand and incredible greed and exploitation on the other—every decision we make these days is not just a spiritual or moral decision. It is a political decision. “The important decisions in our time,” said William Sloan Coffin years ago—and it is still true—“whether there will be peace or war, freedom or totalitarianism, racial equality or discriminations, food or famine, homophobia or hemophilia—all these are political decisions.”

To most of us, political decisions are not at the center of our faith. They are at the periphery. But without a periphery there can be no center. A center without a periphery is a contradiction in terms. Both are necessary: faith in Jesus Christ and political application of that faith form one unbroken circle. It is a wise Russian proverb that says, “The whole world weighs less than one word of truth.”

In a world in which we name drone missiles “peace keepers” and we call CIA agents and Blackwater mercenaries “freedom fighters” and we label war as “counterinsurgency” or “surges,” we need to look at what is truth and what is a lie. George Orwell wrote: “There is no crime, absolutely none, that cannot be condoned when ‘our’ side commits it...loyalty is involved, and so pity ceases to function.”

I am reading Richard Evans’ marvelous book, *The Third Reich At War*, and I am reminded of these fateful words: “The German people in 1933 did not unanimously choose Hitler, nor did they, as a whole obey him gladly and voluntarily. But most of them gave up the values of skepticism and freedom for the sake of material benefits, revenge for Versailles, and national greatness.”

If Jesus Christ is not just an additional word, but the Alpha and Omega of our lives, then surely our vocation as baptized Christians is to be “good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

The locus of power, John the Baptist declares, “is in God’s hand to clear his threshing floor.” It’s a metaphor that occurs again and again in the Bible. The harvested grain is taken to the threshing floor and cleaned. Toss a portion of the harvested grain in the air with a winnowing fan, a fork-like shovel, then let the wind do the work. The wind takes control of the process, separating the wheat from the chaff, a mixture of heavy husks and straw. The wheat falls away from the chaff. The chaff is collected and burned, and the wheat remains safely stored in the barn.

The most active agent is the wind, the agent that separates good from evil, the righteous from the unrighteous, the real from the pretentious, the committed from the hypocritical, truth from falsehood.