

“Just Another Baptism”

Luke 3:21-22

Baptism of the Lord

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In her marvelous book, *The River of Doubt*, the historian Candice Millard tells the story of a trip that Theodore Roosevelt took, a trip to South America, shortly after Woodrow Wilson defeated Roosevelt in the 1912 Presidential election.

Roosevelt dealt with the disappointment of his defeat by traveling abroad. And this time, he decided to explore an unknown river in the Amazon.

It’s a remarkable story—

exploring this unknown river almost costs Roosevelt his life—

but that journey was not the first time that Teddy Roosevelt’s life

was put in danger.

At the very beginning of Millard’s book, she briefly describes an incident in which Roosevelt survived an assassination attempt on his life.

THAT event occurred shortly before Roosevelt lost the election to Wilson.

The date was Oct 14, 1912.

He was in Milwaukee.

He was campaigning, still hoping to win back the Presidency,

and Roosevelt was leaving his hotel for the Milwaukee Auditorium

to give a speech.

Just as Roosevelt was stepping into a car, he paused to wave to the crowd—and he was shot.

The bullet lodged in his chest, but fortunately for Roosevelt, it hit him at exactly the right spot. It entered through the inside pocket of his jacket, and in that pocket was a metal case for his glasses and the speech itself, which was some 50 pages and folded over.

Now...how many of you remember when Ronald Reagan was shot?

They rushed him to the hospital, right?

But apparently, this was not standard protocol in 1912.

In fact, Roosevelt insisted—AFTER BEING SHOT—
that he continue on to the auditorium, and deliver the speech!!

So he gets to the auditorium, stands before the crowd, unbuttons his coat “to reveal a bloodstained shirt,” and then he holds up his speech, to show everyone the two holes made by the assassin’s bullet.

“It takes more than that to kill a bull moose!” Roosevelt shouted to the crowd. And then he went on to give that speech for 80 MINUTES before he was finally taken to the hospital to have the wound treated.¹

Can you imagine that?

How does someone treat such an extraordinary thing—
an assassination attempt on your life, a bullet in your body—
eh, no big deal, I’ll go give a speech ...

***how does one treat that extraordinary thing
like such an ordinary thing?***

Sometimes people do this.

They treat an extraordinary thing like it’s just run-of-the-mill, I could do this every day...

Moving forward in history another 42 years...those of you who are baseball fans may remember what happened in the 1954 World Series. It was the Cleveland Indians against the New York Giants.

Polo Grounds, 8th inning, score tied 2-2.

Vic Wertz hits a deep fly to center field—it looks like at least a triple, maybe an inside-the-park homer—but the Giants star center fielder, Willie Mays, makes an unbelievable over-the-shoulder catch.

¹ The material for this story is taken from Candice Millard’s book *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt’s Darkest Journey*, New York: Broadway Books, 2005, and from “The Attempted Assassination of Theodore Roosevelt,” by Carrie Trousil, at www.milwaukee.about.com.

The play was so memorable, the glove that Willie Mays used to catch that ball is in the baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. And how did Mays respond to his acrobatics at the time?

Trotting in when the inning was over, teammate Monte Irvin said to him, “I didn’t think you were gonna get to that one.”

To which Mays responded: “You kiddin’? I had that one all the way.”

Some might think this was a bit of braggadocio on Mays’ part. But as another former teammate points out—whenever Mays knew that he was going to catch a ball, he had a habit of pounding his fist in his glove first.

Pound the glove, catch the ball.

And if you look closely at the video of that catch...what do you see happen a good 8-10 strides before Mays makes his amazing catch?

He hits his glove!

He KNEW he had it!²

It’s an extraordinary thing that Willie Mays did—the glove is in the Hall of Fame!! But for Mays, just an ordinary thing.

Just an ordinary thing...

Now you may think I couldn’t find any sermon material for this morning, so I just decided to fill the time with two of my favorite subjects, history and baseball...but I submit that is not the case.

To treat something extraordinary

as if it’s something ordinary—

this is what the Gospel writer Luke does **with the baptism of Jesus.**

Let’s look at our text.

You would think that the baptism of Jesus will get LOTS of attention.

² The material for this story was taken from the baseball documentary, “Baseball: A Film by Ken Burns,” by Ken Burns, 1994. It’s found in the DVD entitled “Inning 7: The Capital of Baseball”.

Luke's description of the baptism of Jesus goes like this:

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized, and was praying, the heaven was opened...”

That's it.

In the blink of an eye, Jesus is baptized in the Gospel of Luke.

If you're in the Gospel of Matthew, that's not what happens.

In Matthew, Jesus comes to John the Baptist at the Jordan River.

And John says to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

To which Jesus responds, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.

In Matthew, the baptism of Jesus is a big deal.

But not in Luke.

Luke kind of brushes the event aside:

*“Now when all the people were baptized,
and when Jesus also had been baptized, and was praying...”*

To put it another way, ***Luke describes this extraordinary event as if it were...something ordinary.***

Now I know...some of you are thinking, what about the dove?

What about the voice?

Yes, it's there. In Matthew and Mark, the Spirit of God descends like a dove and there's the voice of God telling Jesus that he is God's Son...and all that extraordinary stuff that we remember...it takes place AT THE MOMENT of Jesus' baptism.

In Luke, there is a voice, there's the Spirit descending like a dove.

But the timing is different. In Luke, it's after the baptism is over, when Jesus is praying...almost like the crowds are gone, and he's by himself, and it's a private moment...**THAT'S WHEN** he sees the Holy Spirit, that's when he hears the voice of God.

Do you think Luke got his chronology all mixed up?

Do you think he make a mistake?

I don't think he made a mistake.

I think this may be the very point that Luke wants to make.

Maybe Luke is saying that God **LOVES** to take what is ordinary—Jesus was baptized, just like countless others were baptized, and now he's praying, just like he's prayed countless other times in his life...and then...this very ordinary moment turns into an extraordinary moment, a turning point in Jesus' life, a moment of God's saving grace.

See, I have a theory.

I have a theory that God **LOVES** to mix up the ordinary and the extraordinary, so that we never know which is which.

I believe the salvation and grace and goodness of God
is found **NOT ONLY** in extraordinary events,
like the time that Lazarus was brought back from dead.

I believe—and I think Luke is telling us today—
that the salvation and grace and goodness of God is **ALSO** found...
in the mundane, the common, the ordinary.

Just this week, I received a thank you note from United Ministries here in Greenville. We get many of those kind of notes, and sometimes I just skim note...move on to something else.

I read this note, and it told the story of a woman with whom United Ministries had worked recently. How she had struggled with addiction and homelessness, but now she was getting back on her feet.

Has a stable home. Has a stable job.

Her future holds a lot of promise.

So you may think that the next time that offering plate goes by you in worship...oh, it's just the offering in church, hope it doesn't take too long to collect the offering today...

Is the collection of our offering an ordinary thing?

Or is that offering plate the very vehicle for the extraordinary movement of God's grace, which works through you to United Ministries to help provide a safe place for one of our neighbors to help her life become more whole?

I recall what the late writer Reynolds Price wrote about his battle with spinal cancer. When Price was in his 50s, a tumor was discovered in his spine, and many on the medical team did not expect Price to live.

But he did live.

He endured four years of grueling treatment
and he needed to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life,
but he made it through.

And Price goes on to say that his "one good memory of that whole stay in Duke Hospital was the constant kindness I received from nurses..."

"By something more than accidental grace...those women were able to blend their professional code with the oldest natural code of all—mere human connection, the simple looks and words that award a suffering creature his or her dignity.

Price writes that if he "were ever to donate a work of art to Duke, I'd commission a realistic bronze statue [of one of those nurses] and ask that it stand by the hospital door."³

Do you see what we're talking about this morning?

³ Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life*, New York: Atheneum, 1994.

This is, I think, part of what baptism is about.

Baptism calls us to a life that may never look all that exceptional or extraordinary to someone outside these doors.

A life in which we live simply,
 and we love unconditionally,
 and we welcome all strangers,
 and we give generously to those in need.

A life in which we offer God's grace to everyone, no exceptions.

I mean, these are not the kinds of activities that make headlines, right?

Is the headline in tomorrow's *Greenville News* going to read:

"Westminster Presbyterian Church designates almost 28% of its budget for its Witness & Service Committee to share God's love!"??

No, no...

The responsibilities that come with baptism don't make headlines.

But they just might make all the difference.
 Because we never know how the grace of God is going to work.

I'm thinking now about my home church, back in Michigan.

This was a smaller church, only one pastor at the church when my parents first arrived as visitors.

My parents had not been attending church during the first couple years after I was born. So after they moved from Minnesota to Michigan when I was about 3 years old, they decided one day to try a Presbyterian church down the road from our apartment.

After worship that Sunday, they were back home with me.

They heard a knock on the apartment door.
It was the minister of that church.

He was making house calls on a Sunday afternoon, visiting people who had visited his church that morning.

My parents welcomed him inside...and for the next 90 minutes, they proceeded to grill him with all sorts of questions about the church. Apparently, he passed the test, because they went back...and then they went back again...and they joined, and they're still there, some 45 years later.

Not a remarkable story, right?
Just a couple, starting their family, mid-1970s, join a church.

And yet...because of that visit that the Rev. Ron Byars made on that Sunday afternoon, my parents became connected to that church. And my dad says that over the course of the next 6 years, Ron Byars restored his faith in God.

And I doubt that the Rev. Byars was paying much attention to the snot-nosed 3-year-old who was in the apartment with his parents...but because of his visit, I was baptized in that church, and later confirmed in that church, and later still, ordained in that church. I was taught Sunday School by teachers I still remember...Mrs. Morrow, and Mrs. McCullum...my Christian faith was born in that church.

I would not be standing before you today if it were not for that church.

Was it an ordinary thing, when Ron Byars knocked on my parents' door?
Or was it, by the grace of God, an extraordinary thing?

The fact is, you and I don't have a clue.
We don't have a clue what our words might do,
what welcoming the stranger might mean,
what an act of kindness may become in the hands
of God...

Mary Ann Bird is a woman who died back in 2012. She lived part of her life in Foxboro, Massachusetts, where she wrote a column for The Foxboro Reporter called “A Bird’s Eye View”.

One time, she wrote about her growing up years, in a piece that was eventually published by Reader’s Digest.

It wasn’t an easy childhood for Mary Ann.

She was born deaf in one ear, with a severe cleft palate, a crooked nose...she required some 17 surgeries throughout her childhood.

It meant didn’t look like all the other kids. Which meant the other kids often teased her.

“Oh Mary Ann,” her classmates would say, “what happened to your lip?”

“I cut it on a piece of glass,” she would lie.

One of the hardest experiences came every school year, on the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, then the other.

It was called “the whisper test”...the teacher would whisper something like “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes” in the child’s ear, and if the child repeated the phrase correctly, he or she passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failing in front of her classmates, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher said.

One year, Mary Ann was in Miss Leonard’s class.

The day of the dreaded hearing test arrived.

As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper.

“I waited for those words,” Mary Ann wrote, “which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life.”

For Miss Leonard did not say, “The sky is blue,” or “You have new shoes.”

What she whispered to Mary Ann was:

“I wish you were my little girl.”⁴

See, I have a theory.

I have a theory that God LOVES to work through ordinary people doing ordinary things.

Will you do something for me this week?

Will you remember your baptism, and because you are remembering your baptism, will you perform some mundane, humdrum, no-one-will-ever-know-you-did-it act of love this week?

Like being patient with someone who is hard to be patient with.
Like not rushing into judgment about someone.
Like erring on the side of grace with the next person who crosses your path, even though that person might be interrupting your plans for the day...

See, there’s only one way I know of to see if my little theory is true.

It’s going to depend on you.

I hope you will I hope you will perform more ordinary, run-of-the-mill, intentional acts of kindness and love this week than you or I can count.

It’s the only way I know of to test this theory out.

Amen.

⁴ This story comes from two sources. I first heard about the story in Thomas G. Long’s book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. Additional information came from the following website: <http://leaderhelps.com/2017/02/06/on-compassion-the-whisper-test/>.