

“Before He Began His Work”

Luke 3:21-22

Baptism of the Lord

January 12, 2025

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

Are any of you familiar with the town of Livingston, Montana?

I ask because I have an aunt and uncle who raised their family there, and periodically, throughout my growing up years, my family would go visit my aunt and uncle and my cousins who lived there.

If any of you have ever been in that part of the country, you know how beautiful it is, not too far from Yellowstone National Park.

Livingston is a small town, not a lot of activity.

But there was a time in the early 90s when there was a good deal of activity.

Robert Redford was directing the film *A River Runs Through It*, and part of the film was shot in Livingston. So one day, my uncle was out somewhere, running an errand or something, when this young couple approaches. My uncle has—or had—blonde hair, he’s average height, and this couple, for whatever reason, thought that my uncle looked like Robert Redford.

Now...my uncle doesn’t look ANYTHING like Robert Redford.

But the timing of things, with Redford being in town and people in Livingston wondering if they might bump into him somewhere, and my uncle being not too far from Redford’s age—well, the timing made all the difference.

On this particular day, the couple approached my uncle.

One of them said, somewhat sheepishly:

“Are you Robert Redford?”

Now what would you do, in such a situation?
If you were mistaken for a movie star?

My uncle knew what to do.
He replied, “Yes—yes I am.”
And he signed two autographs for his adoring fans.

Why did I think of that story today?
Because today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday.
A day when TIMING makes all the difference.

Luke writes that after his baptism, when Jesus was praying:

“...the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.
And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you
I am well pleased.’”

Pay attention to the TIMING of those words.
God speaks those words...when?
Right after Jesus was baptized, before he began his ministry.

BEFORE Jesus has healed anyone.
Or forgiven anyone.
Or angered anyone.
Or gone to the cross for EVERYONE.

In other words, God’s blessing and grace was not a REWARD for
Jesus’ obedient and faithful ministry.

It came BEFORE Jesus’ ministry.
It’s grace that comes first.

It provides the model—
for the grace that Jesus offers throughout life.

Do you know anything about grace that comes first?
Sure you do.
It's what happens every time we baptize a child.
Why do we baptize children in the Presbyterian Church?

Because Presbyterians believe that the grace of God comes first.

It comes to us before we know the name of God, before we ever have any questions for God, before we can confess our sin before God, before we can offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving to God...

So the first thing I'd like you to do in our sermon series this spring is pay attention to the way this plays out in Luke.

Luke is particularly fond of making this point.

Grace that comes first can be found over and over again in stories that are unique to Luke.

For example...

The parable of the prodigal son.
When does the father offer grace to the younger son?

Not AFTER the younger son has repented.
But BEFORE.

The father sees the younger son returning home, and he doesn't sit there and wait for his boy to show up at the door, I'll see how sorry he feels, I'll make sure he learns his lesson...no, no.

He RUNS to his son.

According to Jesus, the father “put his arms around him and kissed him.”

Then—and only then—does the younger son say, “Father, I have sinned...”

Do you see how it works?

It’s grace that comes first.

We see it in the story of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus ONLY appears in the Gospel of Luke.

Zacchaeus is a despised person, a marginal person.

But he’s a chief tax collector, which makes him a very rich person.

One day, Jesus is passing through Jericho, Zacchaeus’ hometown.

So Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a better view.

And do you remember what happens next?

Does Zacchaeus say, “Jesus, if you stay at my house today, I’ll give half of what I own to the poor!”??

No.

Jesus spots Zacchaeus, and Jesus says to him:

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

Then...and ONLY THEN...does Zacchaeus respond:

“Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

In the life of Zacchaeus, God's grace came first.

It's a beautiful thing.
It's also a disturbing thing.

When those who are in the crowd hear what Jesus says to Zacchaeus, and see how Jesus treats Zacchaeus, Luke says:

“All who saw it began to grumble...”

Or go back to the parable of the prodigal.

How does the older brother respond when he hears what his dad is doing for his delinquent brother?

He gets ANGRY.
He refuses to join the party!

You see, grace that comes first is a disorienting thing.
It turns our world upside down.
It overturns our notions of right and wrong, fair and unfair.

As most of you know, I spent a little more than 14 years serving two different churches in Dallas. During that time, I never heard the story of Ben Spencer. Only recently did I hear his story.

On March 26, 1987, Ben Spencer was 22 years old, newly married, with a baby on the way, when he was arrested for robbery and murder. Nothing connected him to the crime. He was convicted on the testimony of three witnesses who lied for a \$35,000 reward...

Ben was sentenced to life in prison.

Initially, he convinced Debra—his wife—that she should divorce him so that she could get on with her life.

Reluctantly, she did...but then a decade later, they began writing one another, reawakening dormant feelings for each other.

While year after year went by, Ben's hope for being exonerated came and went. He was offered a plea deal, but he would have had to say he committed the crime. He said that the truth was more important to him than his freedom.

In 2018, a new district attorney was elected.

He reopened Ben's case, and on March 12, 2021, Ben Spencer walked out of prison.

It was the first time that he could greet his son, B.J., as a free man.

Now...if you had had 34 years of your life unjustly taken away from you, how would you feel?

I know how I'd feel.

I would want accountability.

I'd want the people who put me there to pay.

But years earlier, in one of his letters to Debra, when Ben was behind bars and had no idea whether or not he would ever be released, he wrote the following:

“I don't hold any ill feelings toward [my accusers]...I hate the fact that they lied on me, but I don't hate any of them...I don't want you or

B.J. to be consumed with hate or bitterness... What I want you to do for me is simple: Be at peace because it is far more rewarding.”¹

How did he write that?
You know how he wrote it.

The grace that comes first.

As Presbyterians, we believe that whenever we do anything good or kind or just or generous, it's not we who are doing it, but the grace of God at work in us...

So maybe if that Ben could let go of a grudge, so can I.
And so can you.

What would it look like for you and me to offer whoever it is in our lives that we're angry with... grace that comes first?

Even if they don't believe they need the grace?
Even if they don't care whether they receive the grace?

You see, there are many ways to live it out.

Grace that comes first doesn't just come in the form of forgiving those who wounded you. It can also come in the form of welcoming those who are unknown to you.

Making room for the stranger in your life...

¹ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, "Letters from Prison," in Comment, Winter 2024.

The preacher Tony Campolo died late last year.
Now Campolo was not Presbyterian.
But I think he knew something about grace that comes first.

Campolo once told of a time when he was in Hawaii and because of jet-lag, he was wandering the streets at 3:30 in the morning, looking for a place to eat breakfast.

He finds a café, orders a doughnut, and this portly guy behind the counter wipes his grimy hand on his apron, and hands Campolo the doughnut.

As he eats the doughnut, eight or nine women from the street walk in.

They're loud, they're obnoxious, Campolo is uncomfortable and about to leave when the one sitting behind him says to her friend, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

"So whaddaya want from me?" her friend asks.

"You want a birthday party? You want me to get ya a cake and sing Happy Birthday?"

"Come on," said the first woman. "I was just telling you—you don't have to be mean about it. I haven't had a birthday party in my whole life—why should I have one now?"

After the women had left, Campolo got an idea.
He asked the guy with the greasy apron:

"Do they come here every night?"

"Yeah," Harry said. Harry's the guy with the greasy apron.

"The one who sat next to me, she comes every night?"

“Yeah. That’s Agnes. She’s here every night—why do you want to know?”

“Because I heard her say tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think about throwing her a birthday party right here, tomorrow night?”

A smile crept across Harry’s face.

“That’s great. I love that idea.”

So Campolo returned the next night, decorated the café, had a big banner that read, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!”—and word had gotten out on the street about the party, so by 3:15am, all sorts of people had shown up.

At 3:30am the doors swung open,
in walked Agnes and her friends—
and her mouth hit the floor.

As everyone sang happy birthday, Agnes started to cry.

Harry had made a cake, and said, “Cut the cake, Agnes.”

But Agnes said, “Do you mind if I take the cake home with me like this, so I can show my mother? I just live a couple blocks from here. I’ll be back, I promise.”

And at that, Agnes left with the cake.

Well, no one knew what to do, so Campolo said, “Why don’t we say a prayer?”

And in a circle, with Harry and all the others, Campolo prayed for Agnes. When he finished, Harry leaned over the counter:

“Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?”

Campolo answered: “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties at 3am for people who have never had a party before!”

Harry thought about that.

Then he said:

“No you don’t. There’s no church like that.
If there was, I’d join a church like that.”²

Now I’m not suggesting that we start throwing birthday parties at 3a around here...but if it brought someone like Harry here, would we do it? How far will you and I go to make sure that grace comes first?

It’s one of the questions Luke wants us to consider, as we read his Gospel:

How will we respond to the grace that comes first in our lives of faith?

What will we do with it?

How will we share it?

And whom will we share it with?

If we go far enough with how and with whom we share this grace, you may not be mistaken for a movie star...but it will be clear to anyone who walks through these doors that Westminster is a church where grace comes first.

Amen.

² Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000. A bit of the language was modified from the original story so that it would be appropriate for the pulpit.