

1,000 Piece Puzzle**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (ESV)****Baptism of the Lord Sunday (January 10) 2016****St. Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV**

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

In the first five verses of the Gospel of Luke, the introduction, the author addresses one particular person, called "Theophilus," and says:

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

I imagine Dr. Luke going to great pains to gather up accounts and to then combine them into a good orderly account. I wonder if the following midrashic account might have been one that he considered for today's Gospel.

My name is Ephraim. I remember that day along the Jordan River today, Dr. Luke, as well as when it occurred thirty years ago, when I was just 12 years old. My Mom and Dad had taken me to hear this dynamic preacher, John the Baptist. Everyone, from all around, was talking about him. He had the reputation as the most powerful speaker in our country. He had the reputation as the most powerful religious person in our country. He had the reputation as being the most powerful person in our country. People wondered if he might be a threat to the power of that old fox King Herod, or of even Caesar himself. Certainly there was much talk that he might be the Messiah – finally come, to set our people free.

We were squeezed in twenty people deep for almost as far as the eye could

see, and almost beyond as far as the ear could hear, there at the Jordan River, to hear him. We all were thinking the same thing. And he certainly lived up to his reputation: he held us all in the palm of his hand, as he spoke.

Finally someone called out what all of us were thinking: “Are YOU the ONE? Are you the Messiah?” We all knew the answer before he responded. Of course he was. Of course he was.

The murmuring in the crowds all stopped when John gave his answer: “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

What?! He had us. He had us right there. If he had told us to march on Jerusalem and attack Herod, I believe almost everyone there would have done so. But he told us that there was another; someone even greater. *Who could it be?*

It seemed to take the wind out of everyone’s sails. Things seemed to get pretty quiet. I know many of the adults around me were disappointed. They *knew* he was the one; just *knew* it. As for me, I thought it was pretty cool, that this guy, who could have had it all, stepped back away from it. Humble, yet powerful in his humility.

And then, as John continued to baptize people, I noticed someone coming to the river to be dunked. And there was something that stood out about this guy. I don’t know if anyone else saw what I was seeing, but it kind of took my breath away. I don’t think very many others saw it, because I didn’t sense any kind of reaction.

But when John put this man under the water, I saw *the heavens were opened,* ²² *and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*

Now, let me tell you what: THAT was a moment I have never forgotten. You know, people say they remember certain days in their life as being really important. I don’t think that’s true. We don’t remember days; we remember moments. And that’s a moment I will never forget.

I just wonder if that was part of the research Luke came across to write his orderly account. Even though it didn’t make it into Luke’s scripture, I am as convinced of one part of that story as if it did: **WE DON’T REMEMBER DAYS; WE REMEMBER MOMENTS.**

Life is often like a puzzle. Each piece represents some moment, or a person, relationship, experience. It seems like a jumbled mess in front of us, unknown, as we begin life. It begins to make some (/more) sense as life rolls by and more of the the pieces come together.

So much the easier it would be, if on the back side of each piece, there were a number which showed how they fit together. e.g. The upper left hand corner of the puzzle would be number 1, then the next three pieces radiating out from that corner would be numbered 2, 3, and 4. All the pieces would fit together then in numerical order – nice and orderly, without questions or issues.

How would we like to work a puzzle like that? Certainly, it would be easy. But we probably wouldn't work too many of them for the sheer boredom of it. The only satisfaction would be in getting it completed. Some people, perhaps, try to live their lives like that, so that when they get to the end, about the only thing they can say is that they played it safe and they finished.

And, as much as some people might try to get through life that way, it simply does not work that way at all, at all.

For example, I know a woman, who once knew a man – his name was (truthfully!) Christian. And he made his living as a dancer on Broadway. But, then a moment came into his life – a moment when he said he was overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit. He left the limelight and entered a monastery. And from there he worked until he retired. He asked my friend if she ever had a moment like that – when the power of the Holy Spirit was so palpable you could literally feel it. She said “No.” He said, “Don't worry. Someday you will.”

Decades later: Christian had retired. She was retired. Then one day – no, it was one moment: she fell. It was the beginning of June. She fell and broke her leg. Complications set in. Surgery. Days of lingering literally at death's door. Weeks turned into months of convalescence. June, July, August, September, October, November, December. She never was able to get back to church. She powerfully realized how much she missed her family, called “church.” Another short hospital stay the week of Christmas.

Then the first week in January of a new year, she made it back into church. It was then that the moment happened. She remembered in that moment that Christian had told her about it. She came into her beloved church and felt the power of the Holy Spirit wash over her, and she felt different from any moment in her life.

Life is made up of these puzzle parts. Thousands of them. Some happen and we don't realize just how significant it was, until later.

All people's lives are like this – 1.000s of puzzle pieces, slowly, one-by-one coming together, as the picture is being put together, and often times not at all like it was planned.

Think of some of those puzzle pieces in your life along the way:

- Heart attack
- Accomplishment at work
- Surgery
- Family member's situation
- Death of someone you love
- The smile of a person receiving a gift from you
- On and on, the list goes – THOUSANDS of pieces.

And, on the back of all the pieces of the puzzle of the baptized Christian's life there is the indelible mark of baptism – it doesn't tell them the order of placement of the pieces, but it does give them the assurance that they are a ***beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold***. And that, in the midst of puzzle-confusion, is sometimes the only thing that can keep us going.

Pay attention my friends. And when the puzzle pieces sometimes seem too jumbled up to make any sense at all, turn the piece over and remember your baptism: **you ARE a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.