

**Epiphany IC  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
January 10, 2009**

**I love fiery and threatening religious bumper stickers. Filled with fire and brimstone, and winnowing, and danger and retribution. The kind John the Baptist might put on his car, if he had a car. You know the kind ...”Make your eternal reservations now: smoking, or non-smoking?” Or “The wages of sin have never been reduced.” Or “Read the Bible. It will scare the hell out of you.”**

**But my very favorite apocalyptic bumper sticker says, “Jesus is coming soon. Look busy!”**

**Jesus is coming soon. Look busy. It is the perfect threat for people like us. Good people. Hard-working people. People who try their darndest every single day to do the right thing. We are the kind of people who take life seriously. Who take our work seriously. Who take our parenting seriously. Who take our responsibilities seriously.**

**And responsible, diligent, dutiful folks like us tend to have a different reaction when we hear John the Baptist in this morning’s gospel lesson, hollering on the banks of the Jordan. We hear the Baptist roaring, warning the people that the Messiah is coming, with a winnowing fork in his hand, to burn all the chaff with unquenchable fire.**

**And we hear his warnings and what we don’t worry about is ... “did I sign on the dotted line for Jesus?” Or, “do I need to turn from my wanton, sinful ways?” Or even, “have I been reading the Bible as much as possible?”**

**No, we worry about looking busy, about being busy. We worry about what we have done or left undone. Did we forget to bring food for the food bank? Did we shirk our Christmas thank-you notes? Should we have forgiven those unforgivable family members? Or did we miss a chance to sign up to serve lunch at Advent House, and now, uh-oh, here comes Jesus, and it's too late to do all those good deeds we really, honestly, really meant to do.**

**Jesus is coming. Look busy. It is our particular spiritual trap, the dilemma that most of us are most likely to be tangled up in.**

**I'm as guilty as anyone else. I grew up in a nice, Midwestern family with a good Protestant work ethic. I love thinking of my life as a mission from God. I love asking God to send us out from here each week "to do the work you have given us to do." I love the prayer of general thanksgiving in the back of the Prayer Book that thanks God for "setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts."**

**And I adore the Baptismal Covenant, especially those five questions that describe what our Christian life should look like. Continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. Repent and return to the Lord. Seek and serve Christ in all people. Strive for justice and peace.**

**Strong, active verbs: Continue, proclaim, repent, return, seek, serve, strive. If we do nothing but live out these five questions, over and over again, for our entire lives, then indeed, we will be busy. When Jesus comes, he will find us hard at work, and he will say "Well done, good and faithful servant."**

**That is what baptism gives us, our church teaches ... a vocation, a calling, a commission, to be Christ's body in the world, to confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection and share in his eternal priesthood.**

**And in the midst of our own delight at having work to do, our satisfaction at doing it well -- along with our fear of failing in some fundamental way -- in the midst of all that action, we can miss baptism's other gift. Yes, baptism gives us a life's worth of tasks to do. But apart from that, baptism gives us our identity. Baptism gives us a way to be. Baptism tells us exactly who we are, in God's eyes -- the person God knows us to be, before we ever do a single thing.**

**Look at this morning's gospel. There's John the Baptist, announcing all the things the Messiah's going to do. He's going to separate wheat from chaff. He's going to clear his threshing floor. He's going to burn up chaff with unquenchable fire. And then, Jesus appears, and the way Luke tells it, the moment of his baptism is no big deal. He's just mixed in there with the rest of the crowd, wading in the Jordan, getting baptized.**

**In fact, Jesus appears on the scene, and he doesn't do anything at all. He doesn't judge or condemn, or sift or sort, or gather or burn. He doesn't preach or teach or heal or cast out demons. He doesn't say, "I'm here! The Messiah! I'm going to reward the good and punish the evil."**

**Instead, Jesus just kind of drifts off to the side and starts to pray.**

**And it is in that quiet, silent, seemingly inactive moment, before Jesus has done one single thing to inaugurate his ministry or to save the world ... it is in that moment that God speaks. "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well-pleased."**

**"You are my Son. The Beloved. With you I am well-pleased. Before you resist temptations or call disciples, with you I am well-pleased. Before you face down Pharisees or raise up Jairus' daughter, with you I am well-pleased. Before you speak the Beatitudes or stand mute before Pilate, with you I am well-pleased. Before you ever bear those nails, that crown of thorns, that smothering, suffocating death ... with you I am well-pleased."**

**This is where it all begins. This is how it all begins. Not with a series of divine marching orders, or any kind of a messianic strategic plan. It begins with this simple statement of identity, love, and acceptance. “You are my Son. The Beloved. With you I am well-pleased.” Everything Jesus will do, or say, or accomplish from this moment forward to his victory on the cross, is grounded in this knowledge. That he is God’s beloved child, well-pleasing to God for no other reason than that he is ... God’s beloved child.**

**This is true for us, too. Christianity is not about looking busy, or earning God’s love by doing good deeds, or racking up enough credits to get admitted into heaven. Christianity is about accepting that God loves us. And then living like it’s true.**

**God loves us. Let that sink in for a moment. God loves us. Each one of us. You. And you. And you. And me, too.**

**God loves us, each one of us, with that same transcendent, wacky love that a parent feels the moment they put that squalling newborn in your arms. And you look down at that baby and discover that there is no creature on earth as magnificent, as beautiful, or as beloved, as this one, incredible, unrepeatable, child. That is how God loves us. Each one of us. You. From your first squalling infant cry to your last gasping, rattling breath. God loves you. You. Just as you are. Just who you are. You are God’s child. God’s beloved. With you, God is well-pleased.**

**That is the message of our baptism. We come to the waters of baptism, however it is that we come ... as a baby, as a child, as an adult ... to claim God’s love for us. And to allow that love to claim us, as it claimed Jesus.**

**And then we begin to live that life described with such power in our baptismal covenant. We live that life – not to earn some reward or to avoid some punishment. We live it because it is the kind of life God has made us to live. We live it, because God loves us, because God came to live among us, to die for us and to live for us and to save us from ourselves. We live that life out of its proper grounding, just as Jesus did, rooted in God’s incurable and unquenchable love for us.**

**In a moment, we will renew that covenant we made at our baptisms ... but my hope is that we will renew it, not out of duty or fear, but out of love – our love for God, and out of this incredible acknowledgment of God’s love for us.**

**That we will renew it, seeking to do these things -- continue, proclaim, repent, return, seek, serve and strive -- not in order to look busy, or, to check off items on some divine to-do list, or even to earn God’s approval. We do these things because God loves us and believes in us.**

**Hear these words one more time this morning, one more time before you renew these sacred promises. Remember who you are. God speaks and the words are just for you: “You are my child. You are beloved. With you. You. You. With YOU I am well-pleased.”**