

Text: Luke 3: 15-22  
Title: Up in the Air ~ Down in the Water  
Date: 01.10.10  
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“Up in the Air” is an engaging, quiet, human movie; I guess the sort of movie that reviewers call “small.” There are no giant gangly blue creatures and nothing explodes in enhanced digital glory. “Up in the Air” is slow and detailed and telling...

Dapper George Clooney plays a traveling businessman. His business: firing people. Companies that are downsizing, or midlevel managers that don't have the heart to fire co-workers, bring in Clooney to do the firing for them. Clooney is an unencumbered shark. He doesn't enjoy firing people, but he is always in motion ~ that's how he breathes. He comes in, does his job, and leaves. Place and people are incidental. He lives in airport terminals, corporate lobbies, and hotel bars. He is a stranger to family; his friendships are transient; he swims solo. The movie's undercurrent is how people negotiate or navigate identity through relationships.

What is particularly powerful or painful is that most of the people that you see Clooney firing are not actors. In developing the movie the director interviewed people that had recently been let go. (Clooney's line is that their job is “no longer available.”) “Up in the Air” is littered with real people who lost real work. They reenact what happened when they were fired. And, at the end of the movie they talk about what they felt, what they did, and how they are doing.

When Clooney ~ this stranger ~ sits down across the table to fire people, most of them ask “Who are you?” And, at the end of the movie when they recount their journey they talk and weep about what was essential to them ~

how work related to their sense of purpose,  
how family and vocation bundle together into some expression of identity,  
where they find hope and solace.  
They talk about who they are.

Maybe the central question of the movie is “Who are you?”  
Disconnected, transient American, living in airports and hotels ~ who are you?  
Midlevel, midcareer, corporate cog ~ who are you?  
Out of work, looking for work, wondering about work, retired from work ~ who are you?  
Alone, in a family, in love, looking, lost ~ who are you?

Who are you?

Dear friends, maybe the central question of our text this morning is: “Who are you?”  
Let's get to that question this way.....

Last week I percolated and preached about the confounding and essential mystery of Christmas: How it is that God came to earth in Jesus of Nazareth? Did God become flesh in Jesus? And, this morning we are confronted again with that conundrum.

In a quiet little line Luke writes that Jesus joined the people being baptized. There is no wrestling with John about why a “sinless” savior would join in a baptism of repentance. There is not even clarity here that John baptized Jesus. If you read the text chronologically John is in jail when Jesus is baptized. It is an odd little passage.

In Mark’s gospel the sky is ripped open, Jesus hears the voice of God, the Spirit descends, and Jesus is spewed out into the wilderness. It is an abrupt violent birthing. But, here in Luke there is a throw-away line:

*When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying...*

Standing in the muddy waters of the Jordan praying ~ the humility and humanity of Jesus is on display.

But, then...

*...heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended...  
And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love...”*

Identified, loved, and affirmed as the Son of God ~ the divinity of Jesus is on display.

And there you have it! The humanity and the divinity of Jesus collide, in one little gospel vignette, in one moment, in one place.....

An essential mystery: Jesus as fully human and fully divine.

But, from this baptismal collision Jesus goes to work.

The baptism of Jesus is a crucial text in the telling of the gospel. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the baptism of Jesus signals the beginning point of Jesus teaching, healing, and proclaiming or embodying the Kingdom. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist offers testimony about the baptism of Jesus and in the very next scene Jesus is gathering disciples. There is scant reference to what Jesus did from birth to thirty. But, at thirty ~ he is baptized and begins to work.

So, in some way the baptism of Jesus is his birth narrative. I am not suggesting that he wasn’t fully human and fully divine as an awkward 13 year old with acne caught in the throes of puberty. I am not suggesting that he became divine through the baptism. But, as the gospels unfold the answer to, “Who are you?” is announced, or recognized, or embraced by Jesus in his baptism. And, from there he is sent off with direction, purpose, and identity.

In 1976 the United States of America celebrated its bicentennial. (I was a junior in high school and I traveled Washington, DC with other high school students from Iowa as part of some sort of bicentennial celebration.) It was a wonderful time to reflect on our birth and heritage....

Now, the story is told that in 1976 a writer came up with an intriguing idea. He wondered if there was someone alive who was old enough that when they were a child, they remember someone who was old enough to have been alive at the founding of the nation. He wondered if there was a living link to the beginning of the country.

And, sure enough, there was a Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford. (In the north we don't name our children, Burnham Ledford.) Burnham was over 100 years old in 1976; and he remembered when he was a little boy being taken by a wagon to see his great-great grandmother who was over 100 herself and who was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first American president.

When the writer asked Burnham what he remembered, he said he remembered being taken into his great-great grandmother's house. She was feeble. She was blind. She was sitting in an old chair in the corner of a dark bedroom. "We brought Burnham to see you," his father announced. The old woman turned toward the sound and reached out with long, bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, "Bring him here."

"They had to push me toward her," Burnham remembered. "I was afraid of her. But when I got close to her, she reached out her hands and began to stroke my face. She felt my eyes and my nose, my mouth and my chin. And all at once, she seemed to be satisfied, and she pulled me close to her and held me tight. 'This boy's a Ledford,' she said, 'I can feel it. I know this boy. He's one of us.'"

*Adapted from an essay by Tom Long*

Dear friends, in his baptism Jesus is dunked into the waters of humanity, the waters of death ~ he is one of us. And, God breaks in, reaches through the cosmos, touches him and says, "He is one of us.... This is my Son, whom I love..."

The Belgic Confession of the 1560s puts it this way:

*We believe that.....the person of the Son has been inseparably united and joined together with human nature, in such way that there are not two Sons of God, not two persons, but two natures united in a single person, with each nature retaining its own distinct properties.*

Who are you?

He is one of us.

The divinity and humanity of Jesus are on display in his baptism; and I am back to wonder, doubt, and deep trust. Or, as one of you wrote in response to last week's sermon:

*.....when confidence really matters, when liminal stuff is at stake, nothing but a trembling embrace is authentic or true. David could only express it as poetry. Isaiah fell flat on his face. The shepherds quaked. Mary was sore afraid. Peter said more than he should. Trust trembles as truth becomes incarnate and wonder abounds as redemption unfolds.*

And, that would be a good place to leave it. The text is about the baptism of Jesus.

But, but,..... who are you?

In a culture that assigns meaning and value and identity to what we do ~ who are you?  
In an economy that this is lurching and sputtering and shedding jobs ~ who are you?  
Out of work, looking for work, wondering about work, unable to work, retired from work  
~ who are you?

This morning this text will be read in churches all over the world, and in response people will shuffle forward as music is being played, and priests and pastors will dip their hands into the baptismal fount and make the sign of the cross on parishioner's foreheads. Often with the words, "Remember your baptism and be thankful..."

Your identity, our identity, is found first in God. He would hold us close, touch our face, wipe away our last tears, and say, "I know you. You're one of us. I called you by name. You belong to me....." Baptism is a sign and seal of that reality. We are dunked into the death of Christ and raised up to life in Christ. We are raised up to hear:

*This is my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased....*

*This is my daughter, whom I love. With you I am well pleased....*

Who are you?

Not only are you a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker....

Not only are you a wife, a mother, a sister, an aunt....

Not only are you a runner, a writer, a recluse, an alcoholic....

Not only are you a Calvin grad, a rebel, a Dutch-American southerner...

Not only are you bored and indifferent, or full of wonder and doubt....

You are a daughter or son of God.

You have been called by name and you are God's.

So, no matter what fire you traverse or what flood you weather, you belong to God and God won't let you go. No matter how you might be up in the air, you belong to God and God won't let you go. Your identity is secured in God through Christ.

And from there, you are sent to work....

to love God and love neighbor,

to serve God and serve neighbor.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.