One of the things I love about doing baptisms here at First Presbyterian is how the whole family gathers in those front pews there by the font – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles. There’s something special about a baptism – something different from any other occasion, – when an infant – or older child – or adult – is sealed in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and called to a life in the church – a life of blessed service. +++ Baptism brings everyone together, in a spontaneous family reunion, where we celebrate our love for each other in this holy setting – remembering that our lives with each other are lives given to us as a gift from God… And… we each have a chance to remember our own baptism – our own calls to life in the church. +++ +++ Looking at today’s gospel reading, I think we’ll be happy to see that we are in good company when it comes to baptisms turning into a spontaneous family reunion, – as the Holy Trinity comes together in that particular time and place – among witnessing people – gathered at the banks of the Jordan River – to be a part of Jesus’ baptism. +++ The Holy Spirit descending in bodily form like a dove;… +++ Jesus Christ, the Son of God, kneeling in prayer, perhaps with water still dripping from his hair and clothes;… +++ and the Creator God, whose voice permeates the entire scene, proclaiming that Jesus’ work on earth – which will begin immediately after this moment – is GOOD. +++ The last time we have such a vivid depiction of the Divine Trinity at work in the same time and place was at the creation of the universe, “in the beginning,” when the Wind of the Spirit hovered over the waters of chaos as the Creator God spoke the Word – the Logos – to bring all things into being – and… there also…, God proclaims everything to be – GOOD. +++ +++ Such a focus of divine attention, like a magnifying glass gathering the rays of the sun and directing them in one powerful beam to that moment in history by the banks of a lonely river, should signify to us the importance of what is taking place:: Jesus Christ – a person of the Trinity – is being commissioned to the most important work in history:: – to redeem creation – and all of us – from sin… To make us GOOD – again… To judge and forgive us – …and teach us how to love.

There is an important difference in Luke’s version of Jesus’ baptism, unlike any other, and worth noting this morning. Matthew and Mark really focus on the astonishing glory at the moment of baptism. John and Jesus – in the water. At the precise moment when Jesus emerges from the water, the dove appears, and the heavens are opened up with the voice of God. In fact, Mark says the heavens are “torn apart.” It is truly a glorious moment. +++ But Luke is different. First of all, some time seems to pass after John declares that “one more powerful than I is coming.” The three verses we didn’t read – that come between John’s declaration and the appearance of the dove – these three verses detail the circumstances of John’s arrest… In fact, the actual baptism itself is not depicted at all. When Luke brings us back to the scene, it has already taken place:: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened…” +++ Why do you think Luke does that? +++ Let’s enter the scene together to look for clues… Imagine that you were there… “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying…” What does that look like to you? Do you see yourself in group of people gathered by the edge of the water – women – men – children… and you’ve all just been baptized – and now you are basking in the peace, the promise, of your new lives – saved from your sins through repentance – which is what John had preached to you. +++ It’s been a long day and you are tired – probably getting hungry – wondering what to do next…. – feeling a bit lost now that John is no longer with you… - wondering where your new life in God might be leading. +++ Wondering about the one who has yet to come – the one John told you about who will be more powerful, even, than himself – the one who will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire. +++ And then you notice a man among the crowd– a solitary man – humble, yet confident. He had been baptized along with the rest of you – no difference – and he’s been on his knees – deep in prayer ever since. He’s the only one that seems to understand what’s really going on – the only one that won’t be surprised by whatever happens next. +++ +++ Suddenly, in the middle of that scene, the heaven is opened, and a dove comes from the sky and goes straight to the praying man – a dove, yes,… but also not a dove, somehow – it’s a great force – a power that exhilarates you – you are overwhelmed yet you cannot take your eyes away. Then a voice comes from heaven – speaking to the man in prayer:: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” +++ +++ It’s hard to take it all in and you become lost in your thoughts, trying to make...
sense of what you just saw – what you were just a part of:: +++ “The wondrous dove – it clearly flew to that man – so why do I feel like it brought it’s power to ME? The voice from heaven – it was clearly speaking to that man – so why do I feel like I am its Beloved, too, and that the voice is pleased with me?” +++ Then – when you return from your thoughts – you slowly become aware again of the scene around you – the water rushing by – the people – … you look to the man who was praying – but now – he’s looking straight at you – and he smiles. +++ +++ And you know – he is the one. As quiet and peaceful and loving as he is – (not what you expected at all, really) – this is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire – the one John told you would have the divine power of judgment. +++ +++ And somehow, now, you know the power of the Spirit lives in you as well. – It calls you to follow the man – and it calls you into ministries of your own.

See – that’s what I think Luke is doing here. From the very beginning, Luke invites US into the story – not just the baptism itself. Luke invites us into the call and the mission of Christ – and into the power of the Holy Spirit that comes upon us in the waters of baptism and works in the world through us. +++ The power of the Holy Spirit – working through us in the waters of baptism. +++ This always reminds of dynamos (or turbine generators), working at dams to transfer the power of water into electricity to power our world. That’s because the Greek word for “power” is dūnamis, and it’s related to English words like “dynamo,” and “dynamic:” words related to power. +++ John’s baptism had always been just with water, standing in the river with no more force than the usual currents – but Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, tapping into the true power contained of the waters of baptism – he is a dynamo, mediating the raw power of God collected in an eternal RESERVOIR and converting it to turn our world upside down – to subvert our power structures – lift up the poor – heal the sick – feed the hungry – and work for justice… And Luke puts us right there with Christ: “when ALL the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized…”, inviting us all to be baptized with the Holy Spirit, tapping into God’s eternal Reservoir, giving us the power to respond to the claim Christ makes on our lives – and to change the world. +++ And, Luke repeats the invitation – and the call – in today’s lesson from Acts, when the people of Samaria receive the Holy Spirit through the hands of Peter and John – the living power of God entering their lives and their call to Christ. +++ +++ It is this Reservoir of Divine Power that we tap into, invoking the Holy Spirit in our own sacrament of baptism – and on days like today when we ordain elders and deacons called into Church leadership – ordain them by laying hands on them as Peter and John did for the Samaritans. – We are spinning the dynamo as the Body of Christ – and bringing new power to bear in the world – power promised and commissioned by God, speaking today through the prophet Isaiah:: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” +++ +++

We stand now at the cusp of a New Year, today renewed in our baptism and joined by new leaders soon to be ordained and installed. We don’t know what the year will hold – what decisions you will have to make – what people will enter your life… nor who will leave it… – challenges – successes – failures – risks you will take – love you will share. We don’t know how Christ will call us to renew and evolve our mission as a church. +++ But the GOOD NEWS is – we DO know that the Reservoir of God’s love and power will be there to energize and feed us, – because of Christ – baptized in the waters of the Jordan so long ago – because of Christ – the power of the Holy Spirit moves through the waters of your baptism and infuses your life with the love, forgiveness, identity, affirmation, commitment, and the promise of the Almighty Creator God – whose voice calls to YOU from heaven,… if you stop long enough to listen – listen in prayer as Christ did, so long ago on the banks of that river. – The voice of God calls to YOU, saying, “You are my child, the Beloved…; with you… I am well pleased.” +++++++++

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.