

SERMON – January 7, 2007
Luke 3 “Baptism into Jesus”

G&P

Missionaries Ilir and Kate Cami write:

For some years we have worked with a ministry to refugees in Athens, Greece. Athens is part of the "Refugee Highway," where people from around the world pass through on the road to a better life. In May 2006, one of the missionaries in Athens, Kallie Skaife, reported what happened to an Iranian man identified as "M."

In 2003, everything "M" knew was destroyed by an earthquake measuring 7.45 on the Richter scale. He was tortured by the question of why something like this would happen. "M" went to live with relatives in Afghanistan, was married, and had a daughter. But he was still filled with despair.

Leaving his family behind, "M" headed west and ended up in Athens, staying with more relatives. Though he and all his family were Muslim, "M" became interested in Christianity, finding himself strangely moved by the sight of the crosses he saw decorating the Orthodox churches in the city. "M" was given a Bible and started reading. Since his relatives forbade such a thing, "M" used a tiny flashlight to read during the night after his uncles were asleep.

He studied the Bible this way for two years. Finally, "M" realized God was calling him to be born again. He contacted the refugee ministry center, declaring his faith in Christ and asking for more information.

On Sunday, May 7, 2006, "M" set his alarm for 6 a. m. He wanted to spend time reading his Bible and praying that morning, because on that day he was to be baptized at a fellowship with other Iranian believers. But "M's" cousin had discovered the plan. Before "M's" alarm went off, the cousin boiled water in a saucepan and poured it on "M" while he slept, scalding both thighs and one arm.

"M" came to the baptism anyway. Standing before those gathered, the burns on his arms clearly visible, "M" declared, "No matter what they do to me, I will love Jesus."

After the baptism, "M" said he felt like standing in the center of the city of Athens and shouting

to everybody, "I belong to Jesus Christ!"

John Beukema, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; source: a personal e-mail sent by Ilir and Kate Cami of International Teams

To belong. To be a part of.

In his baptism, Jesus showed all who were there that he belonged to God. Before he starts his ministry he wants all to know that everything he does and everything he says all comes from one source: God. All of the healings and all of the sermons, all of the demons that he will cast out, all of the women and men and children whom he will welcome into the kingdom of God, all of this comes from God.

This is why he was baptized in public by John the Baptist. John can see who Jesus is, and he hesitates to do what he has been called to do. Prepare the world for the coming of God's son into the world. When the water pours off the head of Jesus, the heavens are torn open like the roof of a house is torn off in a tornadoe. The heavens are opened. Nothing now separates us from God.

God declares that Jesus is the Son in whom God delights! Jesus is the one who now declares that God is lose in the world. All will have the opportunity to know Jesus as Lord. In so doing their eyes and hearts will be opened in a whole new way. They will see each other not as adversaries but as children of God.

Baptism is the declarative statement that God makes for Jesus and the rest of us. If you are going to be a part of God in Jesus Christ.

In baptism we are initiated, crowned, chosen, embraced, washed, adopted, gifted, reborn, killed, and thereby sent forth and redeemed. We are identified as one of God's own, then assigned our place and our job within the kingdom of God.

It is our entrance into the church and Jesus Christ. Jesus wants us to be apart of this Christian community, and know the forgiveness of sins and the healing of the heart. This is what moved the Iranian man to be baptized even after being attacked. He had found a community who loved him as he was and Jesus had found him as he read the scriptures and prayed with this community. He family wanted him dead for leaving Islam.

But not Jesus. Jesus wants us to live in the love of God so that we can share that love in powerful ways that change the world.

But what happens to us down the road of life? We get complacent, we get too comfortable in

our faith to the point that we wonder if this church stuff is that important. Or we stand on the sidelines in the church and watch those who are hard at work, not ready to help but always ready to criticize what is happening or not happening. Every church goes through this, every organization that has lost sight of their mission in the world will flounder. Every person who has lost sight of their relationship with Jesus Christ will wonder if God is there at all.

It is a question that I am asking my 9th graders throughout the year. **Who is Jesus to you? It is the question that we all need to ask ourselves from time to time. Who is Jesus to you and for you? How have you talked with him in your private time? How important is Jesus in your life right now? If I have made you feel uncomfortable in just asking those questions then I have accomplished what I am after this morning.**

For if we are going to have a mission here at Augustana, we have to first ask ourselves” Who are we in mission for? We have to start at the very foundation of who we are and whose we are. We are baptized into Jesus. Period.

What does Jesus want us to be doing in Mission this year of our Lord, 2007? What does he want us to do in mission in Sunday School, in Evangelism, in Council, in Youth, in the Foundations, in worship, and in our work places and where we find ourselves out there at home or in the community? What is our mission?

Certainly, one of our missions is to reach out to those who are sick and near death. Reach out to the youth of our church and community. To study the scriptures and pray. To use our resources to fund the necessary missions here that already exist. Those would be the standard answers that would begin to answer any inquiry into mission. But is this all? With all of the talent and resources that we have in this church, what does Jesus want to do with us for the sake of the world?

In a special feature on the DVD of the movie *The Natural*, baseball legend Cal Ripken Jr. talks about his view of success. Even though he is one of the greatest individual players in baseball history, what mattered most to him was succeeding as a team. In the interview, he says: "I'd much rather be referred to not as an individually great player, or someone who tore up the record books, but someone who came to the ball park and said: 'Okay, I'm here. I want to play. What can I do to help us win today?'"

Amidst still photos and replays from the World Series, Ripken speaks directly to the issue of how true success is a team accomplishment, not an individual accomplishment. He says:

A lot of people ask, "What is your greatest play—your greatest accomplishment?" I say, "I caught the last out of the World Series." It wasn't a great catch—I didn't dive, I didn't do a cartwheel and throw the guy out at first base. People's mouths didn't drop open on the play. We all want to be part of something bigger. But we all have our little jobs that we have to do as a member of a team. Everybody has their individual responsibilities, but they all have to come together for a main goal, and that's to win. I've had great years when we haven't won, and they have not been really fulfilling. I've had not-so-great years, but we've had a good success as a team, and they were more fulfilling. So the most fulfilling moment I could ever have, again, was catching the last out of the World Series—knowing *we did it!*

Elapsed Time: Special Features section, "Wisdom"; 00:41:24 – 00:42:36

The Natural (Tristar Pictures, 1984), directed by Barry Levinson; submitted by Bill White, Paramount, California

How are we going to do it as a Mission Team for Jesus Christ? We have had good years and we have had not so good years. What kind of year is Jesus leading us into this year? How is he going to use us together as one people?

Bill is wild haired; his wardrobe for college is jeans and a T-shirt with holes in it. He recently became a believer while attending a campus Bible study.

Across from campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. One Sunday Bill decides to go there. He walks in late and shoe less. The sanctuary is packed. Bill heads down the aisle looking for a seat. Having nearly reached the pulpit, he realizes there are no empty seats, so he squats down on the carpet. The congregation is feeling uncomfortable.

Then from the back of the church, a gray-haired elder in a three-piece suit starts walking toward Bill with a cane. The worshipers don't expect a man in his eighties to understand some college kid on the floor. With all eyes focused on the developing drama, the minister waits to begin his sermon until the elder does what he has to do.

The elderly man drops his cane on the floor and with great difficulty lowers himself to sit next to Bill.

"What I'm about to preach," the minister begins, "you'll never remember. What you've just seen, you'll never forget."

Lew Gervais, director of Pressing Onward support groups; quoted in Men of Integrity (3.2) Mission. Where is Jesus leading us? Let us explore this mission in these Sundays of Epiphany as we journey toward the days of Lent!

Amen.

Chush is a school that caters to learning-disabled children in Brooklyn, New York. At a Chush fund raising dinner, the father of a Chush child delivered an unforgettable speech.

After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he said, "Where is the perfection in my son

Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God's perfection?"

The audience was shocked by the question. "I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child."

He then told this story:

One afternoon he and Shaya walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" Shaya's father knew most boys would not want him on their team, but he understood that if his son were chosen to play it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging.

Shaya's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team, and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three.

In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again. With two outs and the bases loaded, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew it was all but impossible, because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly.

The first pitch came in, and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya, and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya.

As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat, and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and easily could have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman.

Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first. Run to first!"

Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman. Instead, he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head.

Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!"

Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him circled the bases towards

home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third!"

As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home!"

Shaya ran home, and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day," said the father softly with tears rolling down his face, "those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection."

Rabbi Paysach Krohn, "God's Perfection," www.truthorfiction.com (accessed 11-18-02); submitted by
Jerry De Luca, Montreal West

That love comes from the cross of Jesus Christ. Who moves us to be Jesus out in the world and to whom God declares as he did on the moment that Jesus was baptized: In you my soul delights!

AMEN