

Just the Beginning

Oak Grove Presbyterian, Rev. Mary Koon
January 12, 2020 Baptism of the Lord
Matthew 3: 13-17, NRSV

Today we turn our attention to the story of Jesus' baptism in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus' baptism is, in essence, his ordination for mission and ministry.

Just prior to our designated text, we meet John, Jesus' cousin, the desert evangelist. You remember John – wild haired, locust eating, clothed in itchy camel hair. He's at the Jordan River, calling people to repentance – to a transformation of their lives, a turning from sin – and they are coming.

The setting for this story is John baptizing with a crowd of folks at the river.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.'

Then John consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

In the waters of baptism, we are cleansed, called, claimed and commissioned to be the hand and feet of Christ in the world. We are given new identity and belonging. The sacrament is a bold and mysterious union of earth and heaven where God names us beloved; we proclaim that we belong to God and to one another. Like Jesus' baptism, the sacrament always happens in community.

My worship professor in seminary, Scott Haldeman, used to say that he wished we could baptize with indelible ink, instead of water, so that the mark

of belonging to Christ, the sign and seal of our belovedness, would be visible to ourselves and others each day. What a difference that might make.

And baptism is just the beginning.

Rodger Nishioka tells the story of Kyle, a young man who was nowhere to be found in church the weeks following his baptism and confirmation. Kyle and his family had attended Rodger's church sporadically, but when Rodger invited him, with his parents' approval, to be part of the confirmation class, they had all agreed enthusiastically.

Kyle and his parents attended the parent meeting for confirmation, and agreed to the covenant to participate in retreats, mission activities, Covenant Partners and weekly classes.

Kyle was serious in his attendance and rarely missed a week. He developed good relationships with other youth and adults.

And then he was confirmed and baptized on the same day. And then disappeared.

Rodger felt that the church has done something wrong – hadn't communicated the meaning of confirmation adequately. He called the family and they were surprised to learn that they were missed. Kyle's mom said, "Oh, well, I guess I thought Kyle was done. I mean he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn't he done?" (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, pg. 238)

Baptism is just the beginning. It grounds us in identity and initiates us into fellowship and service – each doing their part.

In infant baptism, parents make promises, as do the congregation and sponsors, to support and raise a child to know and serve Jesus. In confirmation, a young person affirms these promises and accepts the faith as their own. Adult baptism invites a person to accept God's call and all that discipleship means.

We cannot consider Jesus' baptism without first pondering again the loving mystery of the incarnation. Its mind bending – the God who created the universe, becomes like us, identifies with us, shares our lives.

Priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor says, “We spend a lot of time talking about God’s love for sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1999, p. 33.)

It’s the opposite with Jesus, who goes out of his way to be in solidarity with us -- we mortals who miss the mark over and over, who hurt one another. Our flesh is weak, our dreams get broken, and yet we’re created with the possibility of resilience and hope and joy. In other words, God enters into humanity in its truest nature for the sake of all humans and creation.

All four gospels tell of Jesus' baptism, but Matthew is the only writer to include the short exchange between Jesus and John. John expresses his feeling of inadequacy before Jesus, but Jesus convinces him that it is right to baptize Jesus. Remember that Matthew writes to Jewish believers, and this act emphasizes how Jesus is really anointed king in the Hebrew tradition.

But on a practical level, this little conversation shows that from the very start, Jesus affirms that everyone is called to ministry. John’s acceptance of Jesus’ invitation to baptize him signals John’s submission to God’s will and unique call to discipleship. We all have a role to play in the unfolding story of the transformation of the world.

Finally, after being dunked in the river, Jesus emerges to the clouds parting, the Spirit, like a dove, flying onto his being, and the voice of God...what might it have sounded like...calling Jesus beloved. The Spirit anoints Jesus with this blessing, becomes the ground upon which Jesus grows his ministry and Jesus shows us in word and action that all are loved equally by God.

This deep, unassailable knowledge of his belovedness buoyed and overflowed from Jesus in courageous acts of -- healing, feeding, preaching, praying, forgiving, welcoming the children, touching the untouchables, and honoring women.

Little Eloise was baptized today, sealed as Christ's own forever. Nothing she can ever do or say or think or feel can change the fact that she is beloved of God. From here, she will learn the stories of Jesus, will grow in faith, and will do supported by her family and all of you.

A whole new class of Deacons and Elders will be ordained and installed today, too. Re-energized by Eloise's baptism, and reminded of theirs, they, too, will make promises to serve. They will be set apart for a particular ministry in the church.

So...every time you participate in a baptism at church, every time you are splashed at the sink while washing dishes, or get caught in the rain, or run through a sprinkler, or enjoy a warm shower, may it be an opportunity for you to remember your baptism. May the Spirit of God remind you that you are called to unique ministry and service, of which opportunities abound, that you are beloved, that you are enough, and that together, we are Christ's body in this beautiful and heart-breaking world

Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way: We need each other for support and encouragement, for care and consolation, as together we remember who and Whose we are. We have a home here, where we take our places at God's table and grow strong on God's food, never to give up on ourselves, but always – in what we say and what we do – to proclaim the good news of God's unconditional and unconquerable love for all people.

(Barbara Brown Taylor "The River of Life" p. 36. *Home by Another Way* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999.)

Thanks be to God.

AMEN