

January 16, 2011
Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Jesus Sunday
“If Anybody Asks You Who I Am”
the Rev. Michelle Slater

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 he 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.’

Like many of you, I am now taking a deep breath of satisfaction that Christmas is over. Yet even in that satisfaction there was not a lot of time to rest, as we had two Sundays of baptisms immediately afterward to prepare for, and celebrate. And it seems fitting that one should follow on the other that way, because there are a lot of similarities in the ways people experience Christmas and baptisms. They are both occasions of great joy; warm moments in the Christian community. They often make people misty-eyed, hopeful and inspired. And then, quite often they fade from our memory and affect our lives no more than perhaps a memorable movie or a thoughtful novel.

But for authentic Christian community, baptism and Christmas are so much more than moments that catch our eye. Instead, they are windows into our eternal story, windows through which we hear again that we are beloved by God, chosen by God, pleasing to God, and that our deepest and truest identity as God’s beloved gives us a purpose unique to each one of us. And when we hear that, when we really get that, who we are and how we live our lives is changed, forever.

You’ll notice that we aren’t told anything about Jesus’ childhood or adolescence in Matthew’s gospel. Right after the story of Jesus’ birth and his family’s need to flee the murderous clutches of King Herod, we jump ahead some thirty years, and find ourselves confronted with John the Baptist. Remember meeting him on the way to Bethlehem? It turns out he really belongs here, when Jesus is all grown up and ready to begin his ministry.

It starts when John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, calling the people to turn toward God, to prepare for God’s coming in a new and powerful way. Into this wilderness comes Jesus. He, like others, enters into the river. He is immersed, to symbolize drowning, death, the end of life to that moment. And he, like others, rises out of the water, alive again, born again into a new life, a life cleansed of sin, radically reoriented toward God. But, unlike those before him, when he rose out of 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.’”

If you were listening carefully to the scripture readings, you might have caught it, the way God quotes himself, using the words proclaimed by Isaiah hundreds of years before: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” This is not the only time that Isaiah alludes to a mysterious figure, the servant of God. There are a number of passages like this, often called the ‘servant songs’ because they are so lyrical. Many scholars suggest the servant that Isaiah has in mind is actually the Hebrew nation itself. In effect, he is describing the vocation of Israel as a people.

And the purpose of this nation, the people of Israel, is to be a people “who will bring forth justice to the nations.” Over and over again, Isaiah proclaims that God has called his servant Israel to be partners in bringing about God’s justice on earth: “I have given you as...a light to the nations...to open the eyes that are blind...to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon.”

So to be chosen, to be beloved, to be one in whom delights and takes pleasure, indicates not only an emotion of God’s but also the will and action and intention of God. I choose you: you are my beloved, my chosen. And what you are chosen for, set apart for, beloved into, is a particular purpose. The purpose of working with God to bring God’s kingdom into being.

And so it happens that at every baptism, we both celebrate the beloved-ness of the one being baptized, and we make promises, promises to God and to each other and to ourselves, to live fully in the love of God, and to live fully into our own particular purpose for this life. At each baptism, we are reminded who we are – beloved children; whose we are – God’s; and what we are for – to be the life and love of God in the world, in our own unique ways. Or in other words, if anybody asks you who we are...tell ‘em we’re the children of God.

Perhaps that is why the celebration of baptism is so moving, for many of us. Beyond the joy at beholding infants being welcomed by Christ’s church, as if by Jesus himself; beyond the privilege of being part of an adult’s profession of faith and commitment to our congregation; there is for many of us, a deeper emotion. The feeling of humility, and of awe, perhaps, at the reminder that in Jesus, God has claimed us as her own, beloved and pleasing. Remembering once again, that we cannot shake off, cancel or in anyway terminate this claim God makes upon us, makes many of us well up with joy, as well with humility. Because even if we turn away from that love, even if we deny being chosen, even if we ignore the claim that we are pleasing in the eyes of God, the good news is that God’s claim on us, God’s love for us, God’s pleasure in us remains unchanged.

It’s hard to always know that truth, deep within us, isn’t it? It’s hard to live out of that truth, of our being chosen and beloved. And it’s hard, sometimes, to know what that means for the ways we live our lives. So how can you and I come to know that we are beloved of God? I have two suggestions. First: we can practice radical self-acceptance. We can practice saying to ourselves, especially when we are tempted to beat ourselves up for some mistake or fault, “Hey, wait a minute. I am made in the image of God. I am God’s beloved child, and God delights in me, right now, right here in the circumstances of my life, whatever they are.”

Maybe we're healthy and maybe we're not. Maybe we're financially secure and maybe we're not. Maybe we're surrounded by people we love, and maybe we're not. But whatever the particular struggles and joys of our life, that life is one in which God takes pleasure and delight. It reminds me of when my son Nicholas was born, and how much he hated to have his diaper changed. I would often hear my husband changing him in his room, and over his cries I would hear him cooing, "You're so cute! You're even cute when you're crying!" I wasn't sure I agreed, but I understood the depth of love and devotion that could think that way, and I'm convinced it is the way God regards us.

Radical self-acceptance means saying: "I am who I am, and who I am is God's." It's like standing up with open arms and slowly turning 360 degrees, seeing everything there is to see about yourself, every aspect of your life, every relationship, and accepting it for what it is – in all its messiness and beauty, in all its incompleteness. This is the life – *this* life, *your* life – in which God delights.

So that's one way to discover that we are beloved of God: practicing radical self-acceptance. And here's another: we can remind ourselves that we are more than we know. We are more than the identities we give ourselves, or the ways the world identifies us. We are more than our gender or our sexual orientation, our generation or our profession. We are more than our positions in our families of origin, our nationalities, or the sports teams we cheer for. The world around us is eager to give us an identity, and corporations and advertising are always trying to convince us that our deepest identity is to be a consumer.

Of course, we are all of these things, but not and never *only* these things. They can never express the essence or totality of our identity. The truth of the gospel is that we are more than we know. That is the mystery of Christmas and of baptism, that we have been born again and made God's children by adoption and grace. That every part of us – every cell, every atom – is now penetrated with the infinite, mysterious Presence that we name "God." That we breathe in God through the air and we walk on God's earth as our feet touch the ground. It means that our deepest self is in God, and that our truest identity is as beloved children of God.

That's why we don't use our last names when we celebrate the sacrament of baptism. Have you ever noticed? We use only the first and middle names. Our first name, in fact, used to be called our "Christian" names, because we are baptized using that name, made Christians using our first name only, not our last names. Because in baptism, we are reminded again of that deepest, truest identity as God's beloved, no matter what our last names, our "family" names, are. "Blood is thicker than water," is what the world says...but in the Christian community, we know it's the reverse. The waters of baptism tie us together more deeply, more powerfully, and more wonderfully than any family ties could, because the bonds of baptism are forged by Jesus' life, and death, and rising again.

It may have occurred to you that the way of baptism, the commitment to follow Jesus, to receive and live fully in the identity of being God's beloved, isn't always easy. The call to be "...a light to the nations, to opening the eyes that are blind, to bringing out the prisoners from the dungeon..." is an awesome responsibility and one which I know I don't always feel particularly

capable of, or equipped for. To be chosen by God and to respond to that call can be both blessing and burden.

Perhaps that is why we are also reminded at every baptism that we are not alone. It's why we don't do "private" baptisms in the United Church, on a weekday or a Sunday afternoon, with just the family and friends of the person being baptized. Because not only is the one being baptized, and each one of us, beloved and called. The entire gathered community, in Christ, is a community beloved of God and called to respond.

And it does not matter whether we are all baptized or not. When we sit shoulder to shoulder, followers of Christ, the waters of baptism, of Jesus' baptism and of our own, bind us together. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, members of a unique community that will offer us nurture and support throughout our lives, if we are open to it. The congregation into which we are baptized promises to help us live out our baptismal vows, to know our identity as children of God, chosen, beloved, pleasing, and to help us find ways to respond. And to help us know the truth of the gospel: that "if anybody asks you who I am, who I am, who I am; if anybody asks you who I am, tell 'em I'm a child of God. " May it be so for all of us. Amen.

resources: Debra Bowman; Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, www.holyhunger.com



If anybody asks you « Who I am ?

Who I am ? Who I am ?

If anybody asks you « Who I am ?

tell 'em I'm a child of God.