

A Sermon for the
Baptism of Our Lord
January 9, 2011
Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised
reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will
faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he
has established justice on the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.”
Isaiah 42:1-4

“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 fulfill 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.’”
Matthew 3:13-17

Today, the celebration of Jesus’ baptism, marks the great fast-forward in our liturgical remembrance of Jesus’ life. The liturgical calendar we follow each year cycles year after year through the story of Jesus’ life - his birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Having just concluded the celebration of his birth and the revelations of his special status that those stories of shepherds and wisemen, we now fast-forward to Jesus’ adulthood. We jump ahead some 30 years or so to an event that all of the gospel writers seem to agree upon. Jesus’ ministry began with the occasion of his appearing at the Jordan River where John was baptizing. That he came and was baptized and what happened there was a revelation also.

We are in the Epiphany season, when the featured gospel readings offer some kind of revelation of the special nature of this person Jesus, or of his mission and his message. An epiphany is a revealing. Literally it means “to uncover.” So, after his birth, the next significant revelatory event in Jesus’ life was this day he stepped before John in the river. All of the gospels refer to it in some way. Most include in some way the description of the unusual things that occurred when Jesus was baptized, the heavens opening up, the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove, and the heavenly voice - “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

But Matthew's account of the events is unique in presenting this little debate, or disagreement, between John and Jesus, when Jesus first presented himself for baptism. John tries to avoid baptizing Jesus. "No, no, I shouldn't be baptizing you, you should be baptizing me." One wonders whether there was some controversy over the fact that Jesus was baptized by John, questioning why, if Jesus was indeed this long awaited Messiah, he would have to be baptized by John. If he was this one who, as John preached, was coming and was far more powerful than he, who would baptize with the power of the Holy Spirit and with fire, who John was not even worthy to carry his sandals, then no wonder John tried to prevent it. The stronger should baptize the weaker, not the other way around. This controversy raises the question, why would Jesus, God's Son, born of Mary and the Holy Spirit, need to be baptized?

Matthew provides Jesus' answer, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." What does that mean, "fulfill all righteousness?" I would suggest that righteousness is doing what God desires. So, simply put, Jesus is saying, "Baptize me now, for it is what God wants." It was important to God that Jesus be baptized. But why? Certainly not as a demonstration of repentance, or for forgiveness of sins. He did not need those promises or gifts of baptism. But as his later ministry and teaching would demonstrate, he came to be God with us and for us, taking on human form, becoming like us, identifying with us, choosing to forgo power and glory for a life of humility and servanthood, embodying the suffering servant described by the prophet Isaiah. So being baptized was a way of demonstrating solidarity with us.

But I think there was more to it than just a demonstration of solidarity with the people to whom he came to minister. In spite of his "special connection" to God, as a human being, he still had a need for the affirmation, the encouragement, the empowerment, that he received from the experience of the Spirit and the voice proclaiming his belovedness. This is were Jesus' baptism, I think, connects to our baptism. Even Jesus needed the renewed encouragement and affirmation that comes from being close to God. That's why he was constantly going off to pray alone. As we see in the account of his prayer and inner struggle in Gethsemane, faced with his imminent passion and crucifixion, he struggled with doubt, fear, uncertainty, just as we all do. His baptism was a moment of affirmation and encouragement to who he was, his relationship to God, and for the calling of his life. You are my beloved Son, I am very pleased with you.

In the same way, while we enjoy many benefits from God's gift of baptism including forgiveness of sins and the promise of resurrection to eternal life, perhaps equally important for our everyday living, is that in our baptism God has adopted us and given his Holy Spirit to us. Just as in Jesus' baptism, God has poured his Spirit into our hearts, and proclaimed to us, "you are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased." This is our fundamental identity, this is who we are before anything else. This is what Luther constantly repeated when faced with the struggles of life. As he in his medieval context would say, when I am under assault by the devil and his evil machinations, I repeat to myself "I am baptized." That is, "I am the beloved of God."

About twenty years ago a curriculum on Lutheranism was created by a Lutheran pastor at a retreat center called Holden Village in Washington state. He entitled it, "Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life." In there he writes, "Following Jesus in his death and resurrection means our Baptism becomes the overpowering event in our lives, the event which

tells us who we are and how we are to live. In Baptism we died. Our “turned in on ourself” life was crucified and buried with Christ. We were raised with Christ to live as new human beings in a new order of existence.” That is, as God’s beloved children, as members of the family of God.

We need to constantly remember who we are. Who we are leads us into how we are to live. I have been reading recently a book by Parker Palmer, a Quaker and well-known spiritual writer, called “A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life.” Wholeness or an Undivided Life or a Life of Integrity he would briefly describe is a life where what you do, how you live, is in complete concert with who you are, your true self. No hypocrisy, no masks you put on to hide yourself from the world. Palmer uses other words for this true self in us, like our identity, our integrity, and soul. The soul is the repository, the container of our true self, that which is our true identity. What he suggests in the book is that life is a journey towards finding unity between what we do and our soul.

In baptism, God has fundamentally determined who we truly are, our true self, the make-up of our soul. We are the beloved of God, loved, affirmed, accepted unconditionally. Greater and greater wholeness in life is found in seeking to bring all that we do into unity with that identity. One thing that Palmer emphasizes right from the beginning, is that wholeness will always be a goal, not an accomplishment. The journey toward the undivided life is a life-long journey. I would add that the journey toward wholeness is a life-time of constantly remembering and re-orienting ourselves to our baptism, and to the identity God gave to us there. And when we struggle with deciding what living as the beloved of God means, we turn to the example of the one whose baptism is the model for our own, Jesus Christ. Who accepted baptism so that he could identify with our need, and so that his true self could become ours, child of God. Amen.