Beloved, Always
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Text: Matthew 3:13-17

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16And 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. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Sermon

Today’s reading feels a little out of sequence, a tale told in a muddy river, in a crowd of ordinary folk, very different from gold and angelic choruses. Yes, the theophany of the sky cracking open and God’s voice being heard ties it back to the mystery of Jesus’ birth - but really, this is a departure.

The folks who put together the liturgical year left a gap between Epiphany and Easter. Epiphany was the earliest Christian holiday, and always celebrated in the winter - Epiphany started as a celebration of Jesus’ birth, the Magis’ visit, and Jesus’ baptism all rolled into one. Easter, of course, comes near Passover and thus has always been celebrated in Spring. The Lectionary organizers followed their ancestors in faith when outlining the three year cycle of reading. So we get this whole “ordinary” period between the end of Christmas and the Lenten season of repentance and preparation for Easter, which begins with Jesus’ baptism but then goes into some baffling combination of little epiphany stories and average, ordinary teaching moments in Jesus’ ministry. And then, weeks later, we come back, on the first Sunday of Lent, to the verses immediately following Jesus’ baptism:

Matthew 4:1Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

We will surely come back to Jesus’ time in the wilderness when we journey through Lent this year.

But let’s not wait that long. When thinking of Jesus’ baptism, its meaning becomes so much more poignant when it’s coupled with Jesus’ fasting and temptation in the wilderness.

In the moment of baptism, Jesus’ identity is named and affirmed.

Jesus is God’s beloved child, in whom God is well pleased.

It is Jesus’ own special version of God’s message in Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord,
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

Then, Jesus went outinto the wilderness, alone, to fast and pray.

And the tempter, the devil, came to him there and questioned his identity.

If you are the Son of God….

The tempter wanted to rattle Jesus, wanted him to doubt himself. But his baptism affirmed the truth:

He was the Son of God.

If he hadn’t been sure before that moment in the Jordan,
he was blessed with confirmation of his belovedness and connection to the divine
as he rose up out of the water.

Here’s the thing.

Jesus hadn’t done anything yet.

Nothing noteworthy. From infancy to this moment, we only hear one story from his childhood. He hadn’t preached his first sermon, he hadn’t healed someone or taught radical hospitality or fed a mass of people or even gathered his disciples. He was just a man with an interesting birth story, and a divine calling.

But his remarkable journey was about to begin, and this was the proper way to begin.

This was the moment when he announced the movement he would be part of.

Brad Braxton, in the African American Lectionary Commentary, says that at Jesus’ baptism he declared his readiness to be part of the kindom of heaven that John was starting to imagine. “Jesus discerns that John’s baptism and fiery preaching constitute a...declaration about a new world order where God will set right all that ‘the establishment’ (in Jerusalem and Rome) has twisted. Jesus wants to be part of” that.

And this was the moment he embraced this movement, this direction.

This was also the moment Jesus received a great gift from God -

“Whatever else Jesus’ baptism may mean...it certainly is the place where he learns definitely who he is in relation to whose he is. At his baptism, Jesus is given the intertwined gifts of identity and affirmation.”

Jesus was going into the wilderness; he was about to speak truth to power; he was about to gather a movement; he was devoted to healing and working miracles; he was willing to work without stopping for love’s sake. He needed words of affirmation and sources of strength to draw upon through the coming years.

Perhaps I think about Jesus’ interior emotional life a bit more than I should.

What a gift God gave to Jesus that day in the Jordan, to give Her son with such an affirmation.
To confirm his power and his path. To give him strength for the journey, into wilderness, into ministry, and to Jerusalem.
All through, Jesus could remember the words the dove whispered in his ear or roared from the sky on the day of his baptism, you are my beloved son.
My Son. My beloved. My chosen. The one I have sent.

David Lose makes the connection to our own baptisms:
“And this is where these stories of Jesus’ baptism intersects with the stories of our own. For we, too, can only live into the mission that God has set for us to the degree that we hear and believe the good news that we, too, are beloved children of God. As with Jesus, we discover in baptism who we are by hearing definitively whose we are…no matter where we go, God will be with us.”

It is not the moment of baptism that makes us God’s beloved children - we are God’s beloved children, always. But baptism is one profound moment when we name that, claim that belovedness. Baptism (and infant dedications) are moments that as as community, we echo God’s love in our vows of support. So that we, as we walk through whatever our own journey of Christian faith looks like, can always remember that most important truth: we are beloved, always.

Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, writes: "In one of our communities there is a man called Pierre who has a mental handicap. One day someone asked him, 'Do you like praying?' He answered, 'Yes.' He was asked what he did when he prayed. He answered, 'I listen.' 'And what does God say to you?' 'He says, You are my beloved son.' "

When you close your eyes and pray, what do you hear God saying to you?

What is your identity first and foremost - before teacher or nurse, husband or wife, mother or son? You first and foremost are a beloved child of God. God loves you when everything's going great, and God loves you when life is rough. God loves you when you do good and when you don't. When times are great, God rejoices with us. When times are hard, God is there, grieving and anxious with us, ready with a whisper of hope, a breath of wisdom, an embrace of love.

We are not alone. We are loved, by our Creator, who gave us this world and trusted us with it...and who forgives us and helps us re-create it when things go wrong. We are loved by Jesus, our brother, who walks with us, teaching and healing, and overcoming death to be our bridge to God's eternal love. We are loved by the Holy Spirit who is right there in our hearts, to comfort, to guide. We are not alone, and we are loved.

This sermon could be titled the same as the one I remember best from my childhood pastor: "Remember who you are." Remember who you are, she proclaimed: you are God's beloved child, and if you remember that one thing, everything else follows. If you remember that one thing, well, it's all gonna turn out ok.

When you close your eyes, (why don't you do that now) and take a deep breath and find your center, and just listen for God's whispering, still speaking voice, what do you hear God saying to you?

I hope you hear, "You are my beloved child."

Amen.