

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

There's a moment in the Gospels that should make us pause. Jesus is alone. He has no disciples. No entourage. He has not yet performed any public miracles, has not yet confronted any evil, is not known to anyone as a threat or a Messiah. But he's ready to begin. He makes his way to the Jordan River, smiles at the sight of his cousin standing waist deep in the river, looking like a wild man who might almost be insane, shouting about snakes and fires and warning people that the Messiah is coming. Jesus is coming, indeed. But instead of galloping up on horseback with flowing hair and a purple robe and a sword in hand, he walks into the crowd and stands in line with sinners, completely blends in, and when it's his turn, I imagine John's jaw drops. "Cousin! What are you doing here?" And Jesus says, "Well, I hear you're baptizing people, and I'm here to be baptized."

And in that moment, John is baffled, stupefied, questioning himself. "No, Jesus! You're the Messiah! I'm the mess! I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" he says. "No, Jesus! You're meant to lead the people, not blend in with them!" "I'm calling them to repent, not you!" "No, Jesus, no!"

Now, this conversation is only found in Matthew. In the other three gospels, John baptizes Jesus, God speaks, and life goes on. But in Matthew's account we have this resistance, this tension, a confusion of roles and expectations written into our sacred text.

And, as one priest said this is a double embarrassment. First, John is confused and his first response is to refuse Jesus. It's a humble response – "I need to be baptized by you!" - but it's still a refusal. Jesus' first public supporter. His first advocate appears to completely misunderstand who Jesus is and how he will live into his calling. It's a bit of a shock.

And secondly, the priest said, there is the whole theological conundrum of why Jesus is responding to John's call and pursuing baptism in the first place. From the beginning, we have proclaimed that Jesus is the one who symbolically was like the pure, unblemished lamb that was sacrificed in the temple in exchange for our sins. Jesus was without sin, we say, but he took our sin upon him on the cross so that we might have grace and mercy available to us. So, Jesus did not need to "repent" of anything.

But I love that Jesus had John baptize him, because, to me, it symbolizes his incredible humility.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus refuses the safe distance of holiness. He does not hover above the human story like a divine drone. He enters it. He breathes our air. He walks our roads. He feels our hunger. And at the Jordan, he steps into our repentance. He doesn't need forgiveness. But he knows we do. And he refuses to let us seek it alone.

This is the heart of the incarnation: God does not save us from afar. God joins us in the very places we are most ashamed to be seen. Jesus' baptism is the divine saying, "I will not wait for you on the clean shore. I will meet you in the murky water."

Jesus choose solidarity with humanity.

And Jesus demonstrates to us that repentance is not about humiliation. It is not about groveling. Repentance is the courageous act of turning toward God, toward life.

Jesus steps into the water to bless that moment, that turning. To say: *This is the way home. This is the path to freedom. This is what love looks like when we are honest with ourselves.*

By entering the waters, Jesus dignifies the very thing we often fear—admitting we need change. He shows us that repentance is not a sign of failure but a doorway to transformation and restoration.

And, I think, Jesus valued rituals. We know Jesus was raised in a Jewish household. He practiced Jewish holidays and grew up learning Sabbath customs. And rituals are important. In the Jewish tradition, there was and still is a ritual called the mikvah. The mikvah is an immersive bath that is used to cleanse oneself. It can indicate a spiritual conversion to Judaism, a renewal of spiritual commitment, or can simply be a transition from physically being unclean to clean.

Jesus was very familiar with mikvah. John didn't invent the idea of spiritually cleansing with water. Jews still practice it – particularly Orthodox Jews. But John was not at the temple or at a man-made pool near the Temple or a synagogue. He was at the river.

This was a public act. Not a modest place hidden away by walls. And he was calling people to something they knew, but by transporting the ritual to the Jordan, he was invoking all of the historical significance of the Jordan itself. By standing in the Jordan, away from the city and the presence of the Romans, he was diminishing the need to use the institution of the Temple which had been tainted by King Herod and the Roman influence. By standing in front of the multitude, he was challenging people to declare their desire for repentance and purity publicly.

And when Jesus joined in, he validated what John was doing. He affirmed the modification of a tradition.

And then, there was the voice. I don't believe Jesus knew this would happen, but when he came up out of the water, "the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from the heavens said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

And that statement is not just powerful and awe-inspiring, but inspirational to us. For we claim that, since we believe in Jesus Christ and are allowed to call God, Abba, or Father as Jesus did, that God considers *us* to be children as well. And *we* are beloved. And *we* are accepted. Just as Jesus was loved and accepted by God.

And that transference of blessing, that feeling that we are God's beloved ones, before we begin our work for God, before we understand what God's love even means, should be the foundation of our confidence, our strength, and our motivation to act. If you can say to yourself, "I am a beloved child of God. God loves me. God is pleased with me." then you can build on that truth.

I mean, it worked for one of the most important figures in history. Martin Luther, the German Reformer who changed the course of Christian history by challenging the Catholic Church, was a courageous man, a bold man. He was smart. He was well-spoken, and, scholars say, he likely would have been diagnosed with bipolar depression if he was living today. He struggled with dark days. Dark thoughts. It didn't help one bit that he had ticked off the only Christian religion in the world except for the Greek Orthodox Church. It didn't help that the Catholic Church had been his employer. And there were moments he struggled deeply. So, what he would do, is to write, "I am baptized" on his desk. On his papers. On the wall in his library.

He grounded himself, his psyche was soothed, by repeated reminders that he was baptized. But what did that mean to Luther? Did that mean he had a one-way ticket to heaven? Maybe, but I think there was more to it.

In her book *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans writes "It is said that when [the church Reformer] Martin Luther would slip into one of his darker places, he would comfort himself by saying, 'Martin, be calm, you are baptized.' I suspect his comfort came not from recalling the moment of baptism itself, or in relying on baptism as a sort

of magic charm, but in remembering what his baptism signified: his identity as a beloved child of God. . . Jesus did not begin to be loved at the moment of his baptism . . . Baptism simply named the reality of his existing and unending belovedness.”

And that’s important to remember. Before Jesus performed a miracle. Before he confronted a theological trap of a question and answered wisely. Before he extended grace to the outcasts, God said. “I am well pleased with you. You are my beloved.”

That’s good news for all of us. We’re not Jesus, but Jesus says God is our loving parent, our biggest supporter. God believes in us and loves us unconditionally, so we can imagine God blessing us in the same way God blessed Jesus. We are beloved, too, and that’s the core of who we are. The most foundational part of our identity.

So today I want us all to remember our baptisms or envision it if you have not been baptized yet. I want you to hear the voice from heaven say, “This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” I want you to chant to yourself “I am baptized!” when you are having a day of self-doubt or depression or anxiety. I want you to stand under a showerhead and feel the water drip off of you and remember that Jesus chose to leave heaven and get soaking wet for our sake, to experience what we experience so that we are not alone. To take something familiar and make it new. To show us that repentance is a positive decision to be better than you have been. Jesus got soaking wet so that we might hear the voice of God say, “This is my beloved.” You are God’s beloved. Live like it. Amen.