

Beloved
Matthew 3: 1-6, 11-17

When I had a counseling practice some years ago, I collected sayings and quotes that were comforting, inspirational, and sometimes just a reason to laugh. Many of them served as catalysts for deeper exploration, opening questions about the meaning and workings of life. One of my particular favorites is one that still brings a smile when I recall it. Yes, it is humorous, but listen carefully for at its core is the central issue that drives all of life. "Help! I'm lost. I've gone to look for myself. If I should return before I get back, please have me wait."¹ 'Help, I've gone to look for myself.' Who am I? Who are you? Who are we? It is perhaps *the* question with which we most wrestle all our lives. The answer morphs and evolves with each year, with each day, as we seek to understand who are we against the backdrop of the universe.

When Jesus came to John, he had a fairly good idea about his identity. In his late twenties, he would have been considered middle age for that time, not quite an old man but getting there. In Hebrew his name furnished part of his self-concept. Yeshua bar Joseph, Jesus son of Joseph. He was a carpenter by trade from the Galilean village of Nazareth. He was Jewish by birth, by heritage, and by practice. There were also glimmers of a vision dancing in his heart, of a mysterious something that was yet to be fully defined, of an identity he could not yet grasp, but one that was as certain as all the facts he knew about himself.

Jesus came to the Jordan, a bit of a distance from Nazareth, to be baptized by John in an act that was a stumbling block for John and a source of many, many questions for us as we wonder why Jesus would need to be baptized at all. He was the Son of God! Sinless! Blameless! Baptism did not make sense in any way. Yet this singular act of baptism would turn out to be a pivotal moment in history. Of course, no one would have known that then. Certainly, not the crowds that gathered on the banks of the river. Not the first hearers of Matthew's gospel who were still trying to wrap their heads around this resurrection business. Our view of Jesus as the innocent Son of God who died for our sins was, at best,

¹ often attributed to Barbara Johnson, author of *Stick A Geranium in Your Hat and Be Happy*. Thomas Nelson, 2004.

a very vague concept then. On this day at the river I rather doubt even Jesus fully understood the shape his call would take or the impact of his actions as he sought out John for baptism.

Baptism is often seen as a particularly Christian rite, a sacrament instituted by Jesus. That just adds to the confusion swirling around this text, for it precedes the Christian church. John had been baptizing for some time, and it had become the center of his ministry. Ritual washing, though, had been in existence for centuries in many, many religions with a universal theme of moving through a passage of uncleanness to purification, from rejection to acceptance. As an adult Jewish male, Jesus would have been intimately aware of all the ritual cleansings, from handwashing to total immersion. John, though, did something different as he brought baptism to the river, away from the Temple baths and in announcing baptism as a precursor to the arrival of the kingdom of God. When Jesus was baptized, it turned the rite even further upside down and inside out, forever altered, forever subsumed into the eternal question of identity. Through John's baptism of Jesus the question was no longer, 'What can I do to make peace with God?' but 'Who am I as a child of God?'

The Middle East is largely an arid land with few bodies of water. Over the centuries the Jordan has taken center place as a means of transportation and a source of water for the region. To the people of God, it also spoke of a history abundant with transitions and new beginnings. One of the early patriarchs, Jacob, crossed the river, leaving behind his old life of conniving and manipulation, resolving to make amends with his brother Esau and with God.² Under the leadership of Moses' successor, Joshua, the children of Israel crossed the Jordan to claim the Promised Land after slavery in Egypt and years of desert wanderings.³ Flowing from the Golan Heights in an area still in dispute between Israel, Syria, and Palestine, the Jordan winds its way through an area divided by loyalties and countries. Ariel Sharon, former general and prime minister of Israel, even cited the Jordan as one of the primary causes of the Six Day War of 1967.⁴ Though small, the Jordan River is culturally, historically, and spiritually one of the most significant rivers of the world. Jesus stepped into the river Jordan to be baptized by John and

² Genesis 32: 22-32

³ Joshua 3: 15-17

⁴ Mehr, Farhang. "The policies of water" presented at the International Seminar on Nuclear War and Planetary Emergencies, Erice, Italy, August 2003.

completely changed the course of all humanity. When Jesus was baptized, the covenant of relationship God made centuries earlier was re-created and re-formed. Jesus, in turn, committed himself - body and soul - to a new way of living, to a justice that belongs to God and not to this world. He would become the leader of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke:

*Take a good look at my servant.... He's the one I chose, and I couldn't be more pleased with him. I've bathed him with my Spirit, my life. He'll set everything right among the nations. He won't call attention to what he does with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he won't disregard the small and insignificant, but he'll steadily and firmly set things right. He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped until he's finished his work—to set things right on earth. Far-flung ocean islands wait expectantly for his teaching.*⁵

What Jesus did in baptism was not just an action that solidified the relationship between him and God but one that placed himself in the center of the community of broken, hurting people who so desperately need God's shalom, God's wholeness. Then God completed the covenant by further describing Jesus' own identity. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."⁶ Words of relationship; words of a deep, pure love; words of acceptance and pleasure. Jesus had not yet performed a miracle nor taught a single lesson nor given up anything. He offered himself and then simply stood there, basking in the heavenly voice that called him and claimed him - and loved him unconditionally. He was freed to be the person God had created him to be.

In her novel *Beloved* Toni Morrison wrote, "Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another."⁷ Jesus went from the Jordan to claim and live out that freed self by first spending time in the wilderness, learning more about himself and God, and then dedicating his life to teach and be justice and grace for the world. Through the rest of his time on earth and beyond, Jesus embarked on a mission to understand himself as the beloved child of God, the One who entered the world so that we would all know healing and wholeness, so that we would know who we are as well as beloved ourselves. That was his identity, that was his life. And it is to be ours today.

In our liturgical, or church, calendar, Jesus' entire childhood and early adult life has flown by in just one week, making this a jarring entry into the New Year. But what a most fitting lesson for us as we

⁵ from Isaiah 42: 1-4, The Message, Eugene Peterson. 2002.

⁶ Matthew 3: 17 NRSV

⁷ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. NY: Alfred Knopf, 1987.

move into 2017, a year that could prove to be most interesting and challenging on so many levels. When we hear the story of Jesus' baptism, it rings out to us of our own baptism, the covenant promised to us, and our own identity as beloved children of God. We too easily risk baptism becoming merely a sentimental, one-time event that can be viewed as one of my seminary professors said, 'doing the baby'. We follow this amazing, ancient, meaningfully packed ritual and then dilute it into an emotionally 'nice' moment. Baptism is earth and heaven shattering! Not merely an initiation ritual, baptism is sacred covenant realized and made alive. Baptism is who we are and how we are to live as people in an eternal dance with God as we search to become God's kingdom of justice and grace. Listening once more to the story of Jesus' baptism shakes us from our post-holiday doldrums to awaken us to life, to remind us of who we are and the work we have before us.

As we make our way through this phenomenon of life with its joys and celebrations, with its challenges and uncertainties, our identities necessarily morph and adapt. Our roles change as we move from child to adult, from parents of young children to people with empty nests, from career changes and cross-country moves, from a life defined by a job to a life of retirement. Along the way, we reinvent ourselves, molding ourselves to ever-changing circumstances. Yet at our core, at the very center of our beings, is our identity as children of God. That will never change. We, too, are God's beloved with whom God is well pleased. We, too, have a mission and purpose to go out into the world to be instruments of God's transforming grace. So we continue to baptize as a welcome into the Body of God, the community of believers. In baptism we proclaim that we are never truly alone in this life, that we are part of something far greater than ourselves, that we find our true identity in God and in others. In baptism we live out the reality of God's promise of Christmas, of Jesus' birth as God with us now and forever. We are beloved, cherished by God for all time.

The great reformer Martin Luther often said of baptism that it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes an entire life to fulfill. Just as we spend a lifetime discovering who we are and who are we are to become, so does baptism fill our entire life's journey as we learn what it means to be beloved by God. God calls us 'beloved', and it spurs us on into a lifetime of exploration and becoming the people we are called to be, the people described by the prophets, the people Jesus teaches us to be. For Luther it

meant to think of his baptism when the forces of the Catholic church and the governments were hunting him down to kill him. It meant to recall his baptism as many of his friends abandoned him on his quest to reform the Church as it was. 'Remember your baptism, and be thankful,' he told himself each morning. Though not stated explicitly, I would like to think that Jesus did, too, recall his baptism at the Jordan on those days and nights as he wandered from town to town, wondering where he would next lay his head. I would like to think that as Jesus faced frustration after frustration when he was so misunderstood by so many he remembered his baptism. I would like to think that as Jesus was forsaken by all who had followed him and as he stood before the powers of Rome itself he could hear the voice of God whispering in his heart, "You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And now, through all that we might encounter in life each day - from the mundane frustrations of daily living to the looming concerns about our corporate life - we, too, can remember the voice of God saying to each one of us, 'You are my child, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.'

Knowing we are loved, knowing who we are and whose we are, knowing that no matter what shape our lives may take we have a reason for being is no small matter. Our baptism defines that for us all and then leads us onward through life - learning, growing, changing, and always knowing that in life and in death we belong forever to God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Sackets Harbor, New York
January 8, 2017