

Beginning As Beloved

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:1-11

This is the traditional Sunday to reflect on Jesus' baptism, following the celebration of the birth of Christ. This is a great way to start the new year, with the freshness of new birth, and now the reminder—through the baptism of Jesus—of our belovedness as God's children.

It may seem abrupt to go straight from birth to adulthood, but the gospel writers don't fill in the childhood and young adulthood of Jesus, except for one encounter in Luke's gospel, of Jesus as a willful pre-adolescent. In fact, Mark's gospel, which I'm reading from this morning, doesn't even include the birth story. In Mark's gospel, John the baptizer suddenly appears, then Jesus appears for baptism, and off we go!

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt

around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Barbara Walters... wasn't afraid to ask the tough questions, but in a disarming way. Often got straight to the point. Some of the celebrities would say, "Well, you don't pull any punches, do you?" But they always felt like they were treated as a human being, which is what we loved about Barbara Walters.

Mark's gospel feels that way to me—let's get right to it! Mark wastes little time in connecting some dots for us. First, he connects Jesus, the Son of God, to the fulfillment of Old Testament longing. And Mark connects Jesus with John the Baptist. John appears in the wilderness, quite suddenly. John baptizes to repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and people came from all over the region, hungry, it seems, to *confess and repent*.

And so Jesus comes, and is baptized by John like everyone else. Ordinary Jesus. No conversation, no details, no fanfare. An ordinary event. But as he

comes out of the water, the extraordinary happens. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and a voice comes from heaven. And the voice says *“You are my son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* This is who Jesus is. Beloved son, with whom God the Father is well pleased. It was apparently important for him to hear, and know. And, it was important that a large crowd hear and witness it.

Why did Jesus need to hear this? Why was it important? Before I dive into that, I want us to first be surprised that Jesus got baptized at all. In the other gospels John the Baptist indicates that Jesus should be the one baptizing John, not the recipient of baptism from him.

This is Jesus’ first adult act in all of the gospels. And this first deed of Jesus, the first act of our Lord, is not to **do** anything... but consent, and receive. This is very important. Jesus doesn’t come into his adult life and ministry busy with activity—with great fanfare, mighty deeds, or with teaching. The first thing Jesus does is consent to baptism; he goes down in the water with us. For us.

Jesus identifies with us, with our humanity, from start to finish, from birth to death. Jesus becomes completely one with us in our humanity, and identifies with us in our humanity. And that is why he submitted to baptism. *He* didn’t

need it. In a way, **we** needed him to do it, and it was an act of sheer grace on our behalf.

It was an act of love for Jesus to submit to baptism because it means that he is willing to go down with us and meet us in our humanness and identify with us in our humanity, messes and all. The good news of Jesus' baptism is that our frailty and messiness and humanity do not scare him off.

And the symbolism of the Holy Spirit resting on Jesus in the form of a **dove** is part of the significance of this identifying with lowly humanity. It isn't fire (symbolic fire) that descends on Jesus, like at Pentecost. It was something that looked like a dove.

Certainly the dove represents peace and that God is bringing salvation to humanity through Christ (as with Noah's ark... the dove returning with an olive branch was a symbol of peace and being saved from danger as the flood receded); but for those who witnessed Jesus' baptism, the dove also represented poverty.

Remember, since we're right on the heels of Christmas, when Mary and Joseph dedicate Jesus in the temple, instead of paying the usual offering for this dedication, they had to avail themselves of the provision in the law that accommodated the poor, and offer... 2 doves. That would not have been lost on

the witnesses of the baptism, and the Holy Spirit resting on him in the form of a dove shows that Jesus would identify with humanity in our lowliness and poverty (materially and spiritually; “Blessed are the poor” Jesus would later say).

This is why Jesus was baptized.

Now, why these words from heaven: “You are my son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased?” I think this is the most significant part of the baptism. These words.

They are spoken because it was important for Jesus to receive his identity, spoken out loud over him, before he did anything. Yes, he is God’s son come to us in human form. But as a human being, he needs to hear the words of identity and affirmation spoken over him by his heavenly Father. And, **we** need to hear those words as well, and receive our identity from our heavenly Father.

It is so important that **we** know who we are. Do you know that God is pleased with you, right here and now? That you are God’s beloved daughter? God’s beloved son? That God delights in you right here and now?

For years, decades, the message we received has been: “Original sin! You’re a sinner.” That’s what we’ve been told is our identity, our baseline standing before God. And I wonder, how has that worked for us??

This is why, in the Acts 19 passage, there is an important shift from the baptism of John—which was a baptism of repentance—to baptism *in the name of Jesus*, and the Holy Spirit—a baptism of belovedness, where we affirm: you are my daughter/son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased. **That** is the baseline for our standing before God! Those words. That you, with Jesus, are a beloved child. That’s where we begin in our understanding of who we are. It doesn’t mean we don’t have areas in our life where we struggle, where the image of God in us might be distorted and we feel less than what we could be. It simply means that sin and struggle do not define us. That isn’t who we ARE. Who we are, our baseline understanding of who we are, is: beloved child of God.

Because... those words spoken over Jesus are also for us. That’s another part—a big part! —of the reason for Jesus’ baptism. His identification with us, but also *our* identification with *him* as beloved children of God.

Of course, it was Jesus’ baptism and it was special because it was Jesus. But he didn’t need to, or have to, be baptized. He did it to stand in for us, for

humanity. Therefore, hear this: we are God's daughters, we are God's sons, and therefore we are brothers and sisters with Christ. So, take it on faith, these words are for you too. You are God's son, whom he loves; you are God's daughter, whom he loves; with you God is well-pleased. Take it on faith.

This is so important, I can't emphasize it enough: we can't start a spiritual journey on a negative foundation. If we just seek God out of fear or guilt or shame (which is often the legacy of we've called original sin), we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative. We have to begin positive—by a wonderful experience, by something that's larger than life, by something that dips us into the depths of God's love, and of our own being. That's what the word baptism means, literally, "to be dipped into." So, we must begin as beloved; or begin *again* as beloved. If we begin with "I'm a wretch, a sinner," then even the words of affirmation and identity can fall on deaf ears because the negativity of guilt, or shame, of God's apparent anger or displeasure, is difficult to get past.

This is why we revisit this passage every year at this time. To begin, or begin again, as beloved in the new year. To be dipped into the depths of love and life as we move into the new year.

Jesus was dipped in this mystery of life and love. That's where it all begins—even for him! The unique Son of God had to hear it with his own ears, and then he couldn't be stopped! Then he has plenty to say and do for the next three years, because he found his own identity, and his own life's purpose.

So, we begin as beloved. Please take a few moments each day this week and rehearse this truth: I am God's daughter, I am God's son, God's beloved, with me God is well-pleased. I know this is so hard to believe. It takes work to believe it. We work hard at being good, or being better, or being self-made, or being... something. But I firmly believe that what we, and all people, need to work hard at, is being beloved. The rest will then take care of itself. If we can begin, and begin again on a positive foundation, positive results will follow.

Getting back to our account from Mark: it is critical for us to notice: ***Jesus had not done one thing before he heard these words***, except submit to baptism. He hadn't taught, he hadn't healed anyone, or called any disciples to follow him yet. So, this affirmation of Jesus came *simply because* it pleased the Father to say it. And because it is the truth. Jesus' identity was not derived from what he did. He didn't receive it because the Father said, "Good job!" after feeding the 5,000—'you are my beloved because you did such a great job.' You've earned it.

No, Jesus' identity came because the Father loved him. Period. **Then** he went and did stuff. A lot of good stuff. But his doing good flowed out of that relationship, and not because of the needs around him, or out of duty, or guilt, or wanting to earn God the Father's approval.

It's the same with you and me. God our Father loves us, not if we perform so many good deeds, or when we've earned it, or because we do something. We are just his children, and it gives our Father pleasure to say it to us, and mean it.

That's the beauty of child baptism. Words of blessing and covenant love are pronounced over that child before they are able to do anything or respond in faith. That's where they receive their identity. And it's our job as parents and fellow adult pilgrims in Christ's church to remind children as they grow, of who they are. God's beloved kids. To say to them, "You were baptized. Here is what God said about you. You are God's beloved son, God's beloved daughter; with you he is well pleased." Sometimes, as a parent, in certain moments, **we** may not be well-pleased with them; but we tell them, "I'm gonna stick with what **God** says about you" and act on that.

So, God's love and identity are pronounced over Jesus before he did anything. And it is pronounced over us before we do anything.

So the first and most important question you and I can ask in prayer is not “What do you want me to do?” but “Who am I in your sight?” Ask that question first, and then be quiet and let God speak words of affirmation and identity over you, the way they were spoken over Jesus. And then we will be guided into right actions.

Our OPOP (One Parish, One Prisoner) team is meeting this week, with our friend Dan Anderson, and Chris Hoke—our mission partner who leads Underground Ministries and OPOP. And the anticipation of that meeting got me thinking about this issue of belovedness, and brokenness and what leads people to do the things they do when they hurt others, and hurt themselves. I’m convinced that most if not all of those who are in our prison system or have been in gangs have never heard these words of belovedness spoken over them by a parent figure, and they act out of their hurt and pain, rather than live life from a place of belovedness.

So I asked Chris about this and he sent a reply I’d like to share:

“Almost all our OPOP members in prison are discovering this (that they are loved unconditionally by God) before even the release process begins--that people who have no obligation to them, and before they have "performed" well

or not once out of prison, are writing letters to them, sending Christmas cards, and developing friendships.”

“Just over Christmas one man I've known here in the Skagit Valley for years called me from prison. He applied for One Parish One Prisoner without fully understanding what he was getting himself into. He called to say his team just had a kickoff orientation and new people were actually writing him letters! This tripped him out. He called me to rave, tearfully, about how wild this was. "That, you know, these people, like, actually CARE about me? Why? My own family doesn't write me letters." I believe he was experiencing people seeing him, delighting in him.” And through them he experienced God’s loving on him.

“A young, former MS-13 gang member did OPOP as well. His team had grown to love him. They had visited him in prison. They knew his story. They had built trust with his 9-year-old son in the community, who now played with their kids. They prayed as a church and organized and fundraised and wrote letters. He was released by the judge last fall and has a future now in this community-- because his community delighted in him, claimed him as their own, as WANTED. This is the experience of becoming beloved (Chris says). It's transformed his entire life and future.”

It makes me so glad, not only to proclaim to you that *you* are beloved, but to know that you are communicating this in tangible ways to those who need to hear it, in your daily interactions, and we are doing this, together, through our ministries and our giving.

Galatians 3:26-28:

²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, (think: prisoner or free) there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

We're going to sing this passage now...