

Beginning As Beloved

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:1-11

According to what is called the common lectionary—a three-year cycle of readings for Sunday services/preaching—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!

Mark 1:1-11

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

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

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

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism

of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Before we “dive in” to Jesus’ baptism I’d like to remind us that, as Mark says, from his very first words, the gospel is *good news*. Good news! The phrase “good news” in English is the Greek word “evangel” which is also translated as “gospel.” It means “good news.” Literally, “good message,” or “good announcement.”

So, a question before us as we begin 2025 is: is the gospel good news to you, and to me? Or is it some other kind of news? This is a question worthy of our reflection as we begin a new year.

It’s easy to miss, but all of the gospels of the New Testament begin this way, as an announcement of good news. And I wonder... how did it end up becoming

such bad news to so many people? Or a get out jail free pass, or a fire insurance policy of sorts...

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is making a strong statement, from the very start of Jesus' public ministry, that the gospel is going to be good news, for *anyone* who wishes to receive it. God's love is expansive!

This announcement of *good news for all* starts at Christmas (we rely on Luke and Matthew for this part of the life of Jesus). Who did God appear to when the good news of his birth was announced? Outsiders. You know the story from Luke 2: And there were in the region what? Preachers preparing their sermons by night? Religious people attending services by night? No! There were shepherds watching their flocks by night. Outsiders.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and they were very afraid. But the angel said, fear not, for behold I bring you *good news of great joy* which shall be for who? A select few people? People who have it all together? No! For *all* people.

In each of the gospels, the good news that is proclaimed is good news for all. And it continues to be good news, and needs to be heard and lived out as good news for us, *and* for a weary world that is desperate to know that there is hope, a world of people who need to know that they are loved.

Which brings us to Jesus' baptism...

So, Jesus appears on the scene, and is baptized by John like everyone else, *with* 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 get 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 *him*, not Jesus, God incarnate, being the recipient of baptism from John.

So, why be baptized?

To help answer that, we need to note that 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, in all of its beauty and its messiness. The good news of Jesus' baptism is that our frailty and messiness and humanity do not scare him off, or offend him.

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 when flames as of fire descended upon the early church to symbolize the Spirit. It was something that looked like a dove.

Certainly, the dove represents peace and that God is bringing salvation to humanity through Christ—as was the symbolism with Noah’s ark. The dove returning with an olive branch was a symbol of peace and of 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 (instead of a sheep or a goat that was more costly). 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 lowliness and humility, which would include identifying with those in poverty.

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. This is a central part of the good news that the gospels proclaim from the very start. And so here are a couple more questions for you to reflect upon, related to the question of the gospel being good news: Do you know that God is pleased with you, right here and now, and always? Are you aware that you are God's beloved daughter? God's beloved son? That God delights in you, right here and now, and always?

For years, decades (or longer!), 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 want to ask, how has that worked for us?? For Christ's church?

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 God's

pronouncement over us: you are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased. **That** is the baseline for our standing before God! Those words. That you and I, 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 obscured or confused, 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 be, 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, or continue, 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, I'm 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 the common lectionary revisits 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 knew his identity, and his 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 if we're going to work at something, how about we work toward 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 of Jesus' baptism for a moment: 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 God 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 listen for God's guidance for the actions, the decisions, the steps that we need to take.

Galatians 3:26-28:

²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There 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. Through the love of God, our heavenly father.

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