

January 8, 2017
Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

Called to Be Baptized, Anointed, and Loved

There was Jesus standing on the banks of the river Jordan. I imagine him watching John the Baptist addressing the crowds and listening as John called them to repent. He watched and listened as John called them to return to God and start again. He watched and listened as he called out the fake religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees, saying they were as sneaky as snakes and warning all of them about the One who was to come. The one with the winnowing fork. The One with the axe who would cut down unfruitful trees. The One who would come not with water to baptize them, but fire.

I imagine Jesus stood on the banks of the river Jordan, listening to John. Watching and waiting. And finally the day came when he couldn't stand there waiting any more. He couldn't stand there on the shore any longer. He was being summoned, called, into something bigger and deeper. It was the fire John was talking about; the desire to get out there burned within him. The desire for that new life John was talking about. Jesus couldn't just stand there on the shore any more. He couldn't just wait

there and watch. He was being called. Maybe you know that feeling too, of being called by God.

Jesus had to get in the water. He had to wade out into the river to where John was baptizing. But John the Baptist wasn't too sure about all this.

He knew Jesus. He was THE ONE sent by God. The One who would come with the winnowing fork and the axe and the fire. John knew, so he told Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you. And you come to me?"

John would have prevented him. He would have stopped Jesus from plunging in. Not because John was stingy about baptism. John LOVED baptism. He baptized lots and lots of people and poured water on them all without hesitation. He was John the Baptist—not because he went to the Baptist church down the road-- but because baptizing was his thing.

But the baptizer did not want to baptize Jesus. He would have prevented it from happening. Because it didn't seem right for the Son of God. It didn't seem appropriate for Jesus. And maybe we have wanted to do the same thing with Jesus. We have wanted him to be appropriate and proper. Maybe we have wanted to stop Jesus from wading into the mess

of humanity. From diving into the lives of this person or that person because it just doesn't seem right for the Son of God.

But Jesus came to be baptized. It was what he was called to do. To get off the shore and into the water. And plunge into this new thing God was doing for all people. Jesus felt the call to get into that river. "Let it be so, John," says Jesus. It is proper." This is what should happen. That's what the word 'proper' in Greek, or *prepon*, means. It means appropriate. It means decent and in order, as we Presbyterians like to say. It means things are as they should be. It means snow in January. It means turkey at Thanksgiving. It means a UK game with your CATS sweatshirt and your three goggles. Deep down in your soul, you know it's how things are supposed to be.

"Let it be so, Jesus says. This is right. This is what should happen. Me, the Son of God, wading out into this river. You, John, baptizing me into the muddy, messiness of life. This is what we are meant to do, both of us. Let it be so."

Jesus knew. Even if John didn't. Even if we don't know if it's OK for Jesus to get off that shore, and wade out into life with us. And get all

mixed up in our sins and our struggles and our mistakes and our bad ideas and our bad decisions. Being with us, WITH us wherever we are, that was Jesus' mission. It was what he was meant to do. And as Jesus was baptized by John, as he went under that water and came up again, the heavens were opened to him and the Spirit of God descended. And a voice said, "That's my boy. I love him. And I sure am proud of him." Jesus wasn't going to stay on the shore of the river Jordan. He couldn't stand by watching and waiting. He was called to dive in. And live a different life, a bigger life, a deeper life. And Jesus is calling us to that life too. He is calling us not to just stand on the shore, watching and waiting. He is calling us to wade out into the water. To plunge into a deeper life with God and with one another. As it is in Jesus' baptism, so it is with us. We are called and the heavens are opened, and the Spirit descends, and we hear God's voice telling us that we are loved.

First, the heavens are opened. When Jesus left the shore behind and waded out into his baptism, the heavens were opened to him. The gateway between here and eternity opened. There was nothing between Jesus and God anymore. No barriers. No walls. No obstacles. In

baptism, the heavens are opened to us too. Nothing stands between us and God. Nothing separates us. No longer is God up there while we are down here. No longer is God locked away from us in a sacred place like in the Holy of Holies at the temple in Jerusalem. The heavens are opened and God is loose in our world. God is with us. Everywhere and in everything God is with us.

Many people don't feel like God is in the world. And it's shocking to think God is. A friend and I were talking the other day about how people get weird when they find out you are a minister. There you are, having a conversation, then they ask what I do; and whoa-- then they start apologizing-- for cussing and drinking and not going to church. As if God isn't aware of these things. As if God is just at church and nowhere else. But the heavens are opened. There are no more barriers between us and God. There is no privacy setting with God. God is everywhere. At work, at school, at home; with our families, in our neighborhoods. The heavens are opened and Jesus has already gotten into muddy mess of life with us. And in his life on earth he will live and love and hate and laugh and cry and be lonely and be disappointed. He will live life and suffer

and feel abandoned and be betrayed and he will die alone. Jesus will experience all those things. God will experience all those things. God will be with us. The heavens are opened and there is no place that God is not.

God is loose in the world. The heavens are opened. And as the Spirit descended on Jesus, so the Spirit descends upon us. In our baptism the Spirit anoints us, we are given the power to do God's work in the world. In our reading from Isaiah, God's servant has work to do. He is to bring forth justice. He is to be a light to the world. She will open blind eyes and release those who are imprisoned. And the servant must do it, not by breaking a bruised reed or extinguishing the dim lamps of others. The servant will serve and work for justice. Justice. Justice, the reading says the word over and over again like a heartbeat.

Justice can seem impossible though. Fixing this broken creation on our own, we can't do it. But the Spirit of God descends upon us in baptism. The power of God is given to us. In Isaiah, God reminds it's about what God is doing. "I am the Lord. I have called. I have given. I have taken you. I have kept you. I am the Lord." The heavens have been opened,

remember, and God is loose in the world. And the big, big things, God is at work on them. They aren't up to us alone. But the small things, we have the power to do them. And the small things are just as important to God. Like not breaking those who are bruised. Not snuffing out the dim lights in others around us. Not acting with malice or using words as weapons. Acting like everyone deserves the same respect as everyone else. Living every moment as if God is present in it. That's our call. To live every moment with our parents and our kids and our friends. Our coworkers. Our neighbors. The guy who took our parking spot. The lady who lets her kids run around the store. The foreign, the odd, the strange and slow. Every moment with them is a moment with God. And we have been anointed by God's spirit to be just. We have been given God's power to be good and righteous. We aren't standing on the shore anymore. We aren't just watching and listening and waiting. We have been called out into a deeper, wilder life. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. Us, together, in this community—together, we will live out our baptism and practice that new life in Christ.

The heavens are opened to us and God is everywhere, loose in the world.

The Spirit of God has descended upon us. And lastly, in baptism, God speaks to us. God tells us that we are God's own sons and daughters.

God calls us beloved and says that God is pleased with us before we do

anything. The baptism of Jesus happened at the very beginning of his

ministry. Jesus was blessed and anointed and proclaimed beloved by

God. And Jesus hadn't even done anything yet. He hadn't done any

preaching. He hadn't done any miracles. He hadn't healed the sick or

raised the dead. He hadn't argued theology with the Pharisees or

Sadducees. He hadn't ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey or sat at a table

like this with bread and a cup and told his disciples to remember him. He

hadn't wept in Gethsemane or prayed for his disciples or laid down his

life for them on the cross. Jesus hasn't done any of that yet. But still, at

his baptism, before anything has happened, God tells Jesus that he is

God's own son, that he is loved, and that he makes God proud.

In our baptism, before any of us do anything, we are beloved. Before

any of us can do the work of righteousness or justice, God says, I am

proud of you. Just because we have stepped off the shore, God is

pleased. Because we have waded out into the water to go deeper, God is pleased. Because we have responded to that call, saying Here I am Lord, God is pleased.

As we remember our baptism this morning, let us come off the shore.

And wade out into the deep swirling life of God. God is calling us.

Opening the heavens to us. Naming us as beloved. Giving us the power to be children of God, to do justice and be a light in the darkness. Let it be so. Let it be now.