



Sacraments and Sacred Moments:

“GOD’S BELOVED”

(Baptism)

Matthew 3:13-17

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Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 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. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17, New Revised Standard Version)

School is out. This is the first weekend of summer break.

When I was in high school and college, what this meant for me was that it was time to begin my summer job. Starting the summer after my sophomore year of high school and continuing through the summer after my senior year of college, I worked as a lifeguard and swimming teacher.

Basic aquatic safety was a part of swimming lessons at every level. It was also something we would review with the parents who brought their children to the beach for lessons. “Reach or throw, don’t go” is a phrase that is still used in American Red Cross aquatic safety classes. “Reach or throw, don’t go.”¹

When you see someone in distress in the water, find something with which to reach out to them. If the distance is too far, then throw something that will float to them. If a boat is available, then row out to them. But don’t go after them yourself. Don’t get in the water to go to them, because more likely than not, they will pull you under.

“Reach or throw, don’t go.”

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So, what is Jesus doing in the water? When Jesus came to John to be baptized, it is the question that John asked. According to our scripture for today, John would have prevented Jesus from being baptized.

The Jordan River is not now, and never has been, a pristine mountain stream. It has been and is a muddy mess, both literally and figuratively.

At the very beginning of creation, the Book of Genesis tells us there is watery chaos. Water is mysterious, dangerous. It is associated with shadows and danger. It is not something to be in; rather it is something to get through.

Moses led the people through the Red Sea out of captivity and into the Wilderness. After forty years in the Wilderness, the people crossed over the Jordan into the promised land. The biblical stories tell us that the waters of the Red Sea parted; the waters of the Jordan were held back. The people left captivity and entered the promise through dry land.

Water is dangerous. Mysterious. Chaotic. It is not something to be in, but to get through.

So, what is Jesus doing in the water?

Point #1: What we see in Jesus' baptism is God with us. God entering the human condition. God plunging God's self into the chaos and mystery of our world. God plunging God's self into the chaos of our lives. God risking Godself to come in after us.

Sandy Kim, our Duke Seminary intern, is leading a Monday night class based on the book *Being Christian* by Rowan Williams. In this book, icons in the Eastern Church tradition that portray Jesus' baptism are described. They show Jesus up to his neck in the water. Below, sitting under the waves, are the river gods of the old world, representing the chaos into which Jesus has plunged himself.²

What we see in Jesus' baptism is what we celebrate at Christmas: God with us. What we see in Jesus' baptism is what is proclaimed in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians:

*though he was in the form of God,
Jesus did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)*

Jesus comes to be baptized by John. This simple scene foreshadows the rest of the story: Jesus' total identification with humanity, with us, with you and with me, even to the point of suffering and death, even death on a cross. Christmas to Good Friday, birth to death, God with us.

Point #1: Jesus is baptized. God does not reach or throw, God goes. God plunges into the chaos of our world and our lives. We are not alone.

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While there is some dispute about it between my wife and I, my memory is that I was the one who took our children to the pediatrician for their vaccinations. She remembers going with me, or going herself, but this is Father's Day, and she is not in the congregation for this service, so... I am laying claim to be a dad who held the babies while the doctors gave them their injections. I'm pretty sure that I was there...

We had our children vaccinated. We wanted to give them immunity from chickenpox, diphtheria, hepatitis, influenza, measles, mumps, whooping cough, polio, etc., etc., etc... We vaccinated our kids because we wanted to protect them from illnesses that might do them harm.

Today we will baptize two infants here, with two more being baptized in the Shine service. And oh, how any parent might wish for baptism to be a type of vaccination to prevent our children from all harm—not just preventable illness, but all that would injure or harm or take them from us.

When adults are baptized, when adults present children for baptism, they pledge to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. And oh, how I wish that baptism could inoculate children—could inoculate us—from evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.

But we know it doesn't. Evil, injustice and oppression exist in our world. They impact us. They impact those we love. So, if baptism does not magically wrap us in Saran Wrap and keep us from spoilage, what then does baptism do?

In the words used in our baptism service: "Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit."

In baptism, we are made members, one with another, of the Body of Christ. We are not inoculated, but we are identified. We are not protected from all that might harm us, but as those who are baptized, we are never alone. When we find ourselves caught up in chaos, when we are in over our heads, when all might seem to be lost, we are not alone. We have been baptized. God's Spirit is with us, beside us, within us, leading us, saving us, giving us new birth, again, and again, and again.

What we know about God because Jesus is baptized is that God enters our human condition.

What we know about ourselves because we are baptized is that God does not just enter our human condition, but that God is with Evelyn Estelle and Henry James and Logan Grace and Reagen Marie and Shawn Patrick and...with you. We—each one of us—are incorporated into God's might acts of salvation.

Point #2: God's identification with humanity is not just theoretical or theological. In baptism it becomes personal. God is not just with us, but with you, and you, and you.

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How many of you remember your baptism? Seriously, raise your hand if you remember your actual baptism.

I don't remember mine. I was baptized as an infant. While I don't remember my baptism, I know myself to be baptized.

God is not distant, remote. Rather, in Jesus, God entered the chaos of our world and our lives.

And when Jesus...came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove... And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This the good news: the watery depths, the chaos of the world, does not have the last word. Jesus comes up out of the depths, God's Spirit descends, and the voice of God is heard: This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.

A plunging into chaos and then a coming up out of the depths, a descent into death then a rising—Jesus' baptism foretells the rest of the story. In Matthew's telling, when Jesus is baptized the heavens split open; in Matthew's telling, when Jesus is crucified the curtain of the temple is torn in two. In our English translations the words are different, but in the original they are the same. The meaning: that which separates the holy from the human, us from God, has been ripped apart, broken down, split open, torn in two. And when this happens, at both the beginning and the end of Matthew's telling of Jesus' story, the same words are heard: "This is my beloved."

The affirmation heard at Jesus' baptism is the affirmation of our baptism: We are loved. This my beloved, with whom I am pleased. Evelyn Estelle, Henry James, Reagan Marie, Logan Grace, Shawn Patrick, Eric, Janet, Mary, Mark: You are God's beloved. With you God is pleased.

It is an affirmation afforded without cost. It is not something we earn. It is an affirmation that is all grace.

Whether you were baptized as an infant, a youth, or an adult, the affirmation of baptism is the same: You are God's beloved. With you God is pleased.

Whether you cried as you were baptized, or spit up over the fancy gown, or were simply baptized in a diaper, the affirmation of baptism is the same: You are God's beloved. With you God is pleased.

Whether your accomplishments measure up to those of your high school classmates whose social media presence makes your life seem unaccomplished and mediocre, the affirmation from your baptism is the same: You are God's beloved. With you God is pleased.

Whether you have a deep and abiding faith or have doubts and wonder whether you have any faith at all, the affirmation from your baptism is the same: You are God's beloved. With you God is pleased.

Whether you conform to the expectations others have for you, regardless of how chaotic life may seem, regardless of the uncertainty in which you may feel yourself ready to drown, the affirmation of your baptism is the same: You are God's beloved. With you God is pleased.

Point #3 is this: As Christ's body, as the church, we promise to uphold and support those we baptize, and we pledge to help them grow into their identity as children of God; this means that we must regularly remind each other of the truth celebrated through baptism: Each one of us is God's beloved. And God is proud of us.

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The Bible includes multiple images for God, including God as both mother and father. In the reading for today, a voice from heaven says of Jesus: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Today is Father's Day. Those of you who are fathers, I do not have a gift to give to you. Sorry. Rather, what I have for you today is an assignment. Though school is out, I'm giving you an assignment. Do for your children what our heavenly Father does for his child. Tell them they are loved. Tell them that you are proud of them.

I don't care whether your children are two months old, two years old, twenty years old or sixty years old. When you see them today, when you talk to them today, tell them you love them and that you are proud of them. And don't just do it today, do it often. I love you. I am proud of you. Children of every age need to hear these words.

Baptism is a sacred moment in which I as clergy person am privileged to share. Another such moment is when I sit with families following a death and I ask them to tell me about the one whose life we are preparing to celebrate with a funeral service. Never in such a conversation have I heard a child say that their parent spoke too often to them of their love and pride.

I love you. I am proud of you. Children of every age need to hear these words. We need to hear these words.

These words need be spoken often, and not just from fathers. Our children need to hear these words from mothers as well. They need to hear these words from the adults in their lives who care for them as parents, be they aunts, or uncles, or family friends. I love you. I am proud of you.

I love you. I am proud of you. They are words that can get us through the chaos. They are words that keep us safe, even in the deep waters of life. They are the holy words—God words—spoken about us in our baptism. And through God’s grace they are the words we will hear when we pass from this life into God’s promise.

#1: God is with us. In the chaos of our world and of our lives.

#2: God is with us. Not just as a theological assertion, but through baptism, the theoretical becomes personal: we—you and I—belong to God. We are incorporated in God’s mighty acts of salvation. God is with us, and nothing—nothing—can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

#3: We are God’s beloved. And God is proud of us.

I love you. I am proud of you.

Wherever you may be on life’s journey, I pray that you might hear, again, again and again, God’s truth spoken through baptism.

You are God’s beloved. And God is proud of you.

May you know this. May we help each other know this. Amen.

¹ http://www.redcross.org/images/MEDIA_CustomProductCatalog/m44240110_Reach_or_throw_dont_go.pdf

² Williams, R. (2014). *Being Christian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, p. 3.