



You are Beloved!

Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; January 12, 2025

(Preached on January 19 due to weather-related church closure.)

Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Like most everyone in the world, preachers want to be loved. But wanting to be loved can get a preacher into trouble. There is danger in being less prophetic than God asks us to be. What if we make someone angry? What if someone doesn't like us anymore? Fearful, we may let sin slide, and be tempted to preach the cotton candy gospel, or resist speaking the truth—even when it is in love.

Wanting to be loved by the masses is not a problem for John the Baptist. John just tells it like it is—no tiptoeing around this or that. “That’s a sin against God—so STOP it!” Does he offend King Herod? Of course! How about the Romans? Absolutely! John levels his wrath against anyone he deems unjust or immoral or just plain lazy. You might say that John the Baptist is an equal opportunity offender. With wild hair, a bizarre diet, and living out in the wilderness, it is unlikely

that John has retained the social graces required to live with “normal folk.” But none of this matters to John.

While John’s behavior is great theater, it is much more than that! Thousands come to hear his rants—many follow up with baptism. Whenever I think of all those people wending their way down to the Jordan River, I can’t help but recall a similar scene in the movie “O Brother Where Art Thou.” People line up...one after the other...and there they go into the river to be drenched with the cleansing waters of baptism—hoping against hope for a new start. Such great expectations! That’s what the people carry in their hearts in the movie, and it’s what the people carry in their hearts as they approach John. In fact, Luke tells us they are wondering in their hearts if John might actually be the Messiah. Could he be the one? As if stopping the very thought in its tracks, John sets the record straight. “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

“O John, say it isn’t so! You can’t mean you are going to step down. You can’t mean you are going to give it all up. You’re just getting started.” But step down is exactly what he will do when the time draws nigh, which should come as no surprise since John has always known his place in the world—even before his birth. Luke tells us, you will recall, how John leapt in his mother’s womb when she approached her cousin Mary, who was carrying the Christ Child. Even then, John was filled with joy at the nearness of Jesus. And now, once again, John leaps for joy at the thought of finishing the work he’s been called to do and turning it over to the true Messiah.

We get another glimpse of John’s character from the Gospel of John when some of his disciples approach him to inquire about this Jesus to whom people are flocking. John responds with such humility, “You yourselves are witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him’...He must increase but I must decrease.”¹ For John, success is not about drawing a crowd or gathering a following. It is not about filling the pews or overflowing the coffers. For John, success is serving the One who is coming after him, the Messiah, the Lord. It is about being faithful to the end.

These days, however, success is defined differently—mostly in financial terms. And the worship of success causes countless people to spend their lives trying to achieve the unachievable. Although we live in the land of the “pursuit of happiness,” for too many Americans, it’s just that—a pursuit. There is no end—really—to the chase of the almighty dollar. Someone once asked John D. Rockefeller, “Mr. Rockefeller, how much money is enough?” and he replied, “Just a little more.”

In the eyes of the world, even in 1st century Palestine, John the Baptist was not successful (especially after he lost his head). But then, neither was Jesus, for Jesus had a different view of the world. We can tell that by what happened at the Last Supper. With his friends gathered around and a bountiful table spread before them—including bread and wine, “This is my body,” he said, “broken for you...this is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins...” Doesn’t sound like

much of a success, does it? And then, from the cross, “Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani,” he cries. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The good news known as the gospel turns the world’s notion of success upside down. John the Baptist gives up his place for the Righteous One coming after him. Jesus gives up his life for rabble-rousers like those disciples who abandon, deny, and betray him.

I invite you to hear once more these words from Luke, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

As I pondered this text, the phrase “when all were baptized” caught my attention. Jesus, who of all people does not need to have his sins washed away, enters the water WITH the people. He identifies with everyone who is broken and frightened and sinful to the core. One scholar notes, “I like to consider this [act], his first miracle; the miracle of his humility. The first thing that Jesus does for us is go down with us. His whole life will be like this. It is well known that Jesus ended his career on a cross between two thieves; it deserves to be as well-known that he began his ministry in a river among penitent sinners.”ⁱⁱ And from that place, he heard these words, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Now that must have been something to hear! Oh, to hear it again! On this topic, Henri Nouwen wrote,

Many voices ask for our attention. There is the voice that says, “Prove that you are a good person.” Another voice says, “You [ought to] be ashamed of yourself.” There also is a voice that says, “Nobody really cares about you,” and one that says, “Be sure to become successful, popular, and powerful.” But underneath all these often very noisy voices is a still small voice that says, ‘You are my Beloved, my favor rests on you.’ That’s the voice we need most of all to hear.ⁱⁱⁱ

That still small voice that says, “You are my Beloved, my favor rests on you,” is the voice I yearn for us to hear as we approach the font this morning, touch the water, and embrace the new life that is ours. Amen!

ⁱ John 3:28-30

ⁱⁱ Dale Brunner, *Lectionary Preacher Workbook*, ed. Carlos Wilton, 61.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*

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