

“You Are Mine”

Isaiah 43.1-7; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

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Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized. Most of us know that. He was baptized by his cousin John, the son of Elizabeth, the same Elizabeth whom Jesus’ mother Mary went to visit when the two of them were pregnant. We talked about that story last month. John had been out there, in the wilderness, telling people to straighten up their lives and confess their sins, and a whole ton of people had been coming out to him. It seems that there were an awful lot of people in Jerusalem and Judea and the surrounding areas who had two issues: (1) they weren’t feeling like their lives were as good or as clean or as pure as they wanted them to be, and (2) there were all these religious institutions that weren’t doing diddly-squat to help them. It had become, for too many people, an empty set of rituals. And if we’re honest, those two phenomena kinda describe our country today. A lot of people who feel like they’re not “good enough,” some of whom feel like they’re not worthy of God’s love. And a lot of people who have just given up on the institutional church, because they think we’re hypocritical, or we’re too judgmental, or we go through all these rituals that don’t seem to have any real effect on people’s lives, or whatever. Honestly, we could use some folks like John the Baptist, people who can connect with other people, outside the walls of the church, and lead them towards God.

So, Jesus came to be baptized by John. Here were all these people who needed a “tune up”, and along comes Jesus. Did he need a “tune up” too? We know very little about his life *before* his baptism. His stepfather was a carpenter. He had some younger siblings. He went missing when he was twelve years old; he was hanging out in the temple talking with the elders, when the rest of the group who had come to Jerusalem was heading back home. That was probably the worst thing he ever did, and it wasn’t even a bad thing. Did Jesus need to have his sins forgiven? No. He was the only human who ever lived who was without sin – because he wasn’t merely human. Why did he need to be baptized?

A lot of people have asked that question. There’s not one clear answer, *except* – over in Matthew’s gospel – when Jesus presents himself for baptism, John himself says to him, “Why do *you* need to be baptized?” Jesus replies: “It is fitting for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Which is a fancy way of saying, “It’s the right thing to do.” *Why* is it the right thing to do? Maybe because of what happens when Jesus is in the water.

See, it’s not the baptism *by John* that’s what matters. It’s the baptism that Jesus receives *by the Holy Spirit*. Jesus goes down into the water, and *something happens*, something that’s different from

everybody else. As Luke puts it: “heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove.” You have to imagine a tearing of the celestial curtain, and the Spirit of God itself comes *through* that curtain, alighting on Jesus. Something *happens* to Jesus in that moment, something spark that ignites. This is when Jesus’ ministry *really* begins. And with that Spirit, that vision of something resembling a dove, comes a Voice from beyond the curtain, speaking *directly* to Jesus: “You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased.”

I think that was the moment when Jesus remembered who he *truly* was. The moment when he remembered that *he himself* came from beyond that curtain. I am inclined to think that, for the 30 years of his life, he *didn't really know that he was the Son of God*. There, in the water, it all comes rushing back to him: his origin, his purpose, his *destiny*.

There's something about the waters of baptism that remind us of *who we truly are*. We are not just the children of our parents. We are the children of our heavenly Father. The *beloved* children of our heavenly Father. Beloved children, who are *claimed* by God, for a purpose: not just to live our *own* lives, as we see fit, but to live our lives *for him*. For the One who came to live and die and rise for us.

Isaiah puts like this: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” We have been *redeemed*; Jesus has bought us for a price, the price of his own life; we have been purchased, ransomed, liberated, *freed*. The result is magnificent. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and the flame won't burn you.” God is not saying that we will never have any trouble in life. No, there are still times when we have to *pass through the waters*, or *walk through the fire*. When crisis comes, when we go through an terrible ordeal. We are not promised a life free from challenge or suffering. The difference is – *we do not have to make that journey alone*. *GOD* will be right there by our side. He will see us safely through. Even when that day comes when we take our last breath, there is a *hope*, there is a *glory*, there is a *destiny* that awaits us on the other side. We will *never* be alone, we will *never* be forgotten, we will *never* be abandoned; we need *never* be without hope.

Sometimes, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we have invited you to come up, during the service, to touch the water here in the baptismal font, as a reminder of your own baptism and the promises you have made to God, and the promises God has made to you. Due to the timing of Epiphany last Sunday and the ordination and installation of Deacons and Elders today, we do not have sufficient time for that during worship today. However, I would like to invite and encourage you, after the service is over, to come forward and touch the water. If you wish, use the water to mark a sign of the cross on your palm or your wrist or your forehead, a sign reminding you that you are Christ's own – beloved, ransomed, redeemed, liberated, freed. Those waters of baptism are a precious gift, given for *you*. Treasure them. Remember them. *Feel* them, flowing over you, around you, bathing you with the precious love of God.

In six days, I am going to have a unique opportunity to do something similar. As most of you know, on Wednesday of this week, Katharine and I leave on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Originally it was just going to be me, but thanks to a generous gift from my parents, Katharine is going to be able to come along. On Saturday, we will head to the Jordan River, to the very place (we think) where Jesus was

baptized by John. We will have an opportunity to take off our sandals, step down into the water, *feel* the water, flowing over us, around us, bathing us with the precious love of God.

I have to remind myself that there's nothing special about that water. This water we have here is just as special, just as precious, just as holy, as the water in the Jordan River. There's nothing "magical" about the Jordan River. The Holy Spirit works there the same way it does here.

Except ... there's still something about *being in the very places* where Jesus walked and taught, healed and loved. To feel the sand, the sun, the water, much the same way he did. Honestly, I don't know what to expect. I don't know what being there is going to *feel* like.

There's a detailed itinerary. We'll be spending about four days in and around Jerusalem, three days in and around Bethlehem, and four days in Galilee. We'll visit many historical sites, museums, and churches. We'll learn about the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, meet with peacemaking teams, and visit a refugee camp. We expect to see an old college friend, who lives in Jerusalem with her family. We'll begin our days with devotions reflecting on the iconography associated with the sites to be visited as depicted in the great art of the past. We'll end our days with educational sessions after dinner. I expect to take lots of pictures and I hope to have time to write.

I've been asking myself: *what do I hope to get out of this experience?* This is unlike anything I have ever done before. We will simultaneously be tourists, students, and pilgrims. For countless centuries, Christians have been making pilgrimages to Jerusalem. There was a woman named Egeria, who – 17 centuries ago! – embarked on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem from her home in western Europe, and recorded all her travels in a diary, most of which survives to this day. Her journey was much longer than ours will be – she spent *three years* in Jerusalem! – and of course she didn't have the convenience of commercial airplanes and tour buses. But why did she go on her trip? Why am I going on mine?

For me, I think it boils down to three key things. Like a *tourist*, I hope to *see* some fascinating and beautiful sites. Like a *student*, I hope to *learn* some interesting and illuminating things. And like a *pilgrim* ... I hope to have some kind of spiritual *experience* while I'm there. Something that will deepen and enrich my faith, something that will renew my passion and devotion to God. Honestly, I hope that *God will speak to me*, somewhere along the journey. He spoke to Jesus, long ago, when *he* was in the waters of the Jordan. He speaks to *all* of us, in various and sundry places, when we're paying attention, when we're open to listening. *May he speak to me.*

I'd like to ask one thing of you, if I may: your prayers. Prayers for safe travels, of course. Prayers that everything will go fine for the boys, back home. We're expecting that they will be fine – two of them are adults, and two family members will be coming for more than half of the time we will be away – but still, a few extra prayers wouldn't hurt. Prayers for Katharine and myself, that this experience will be enriching, rewarding, and renewing, for both of us. Thank you, in advance, for those prayers, and thank you to those of you who helped make this possible. I am deeply grateful.

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