

Matthew 3:13-17

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.'

Do You Know How Beloved You Are?

I was watching an episode of "The Grand Tour" recently. It's a funny series hosted by three car-experts – they can build cars, race cars, and test drive and critique cars, and the episode I was watching was one of their Christmas episodes, so they had a Christmas tree on the set. And each of the three hosts – Richard, James, and Jeremy – had added some of the lighting decorations to the tree using parts of a car, and they took turns showing off their unusual tree decorations. So Richard plugged in his decorations first; he had used a series of car back-up lights strung around the tree. Then came James, who had used all sorts of indicator lights like you find on the dashboard of your car, and blinked and flashed like indicator lights so often do. Then came Jeremy, who had used bright panel lights like some people have around the doors of limousines, and the lights were in the shape of a big cross which shone very brightly from the top of the tree. So James asked Jeremy, "Why a cross?" to which Jeremy responded, "Because its Christmas!" So James and Richard had to explain that he had used the wrong symbol for Christmas, that you're supposed to have a star on the top of the tree. The cross is the Easter symbol. James looked at the cross on the Christmas tree and said, "That is a huge spoiler alert." And he's right: Christmas is the happy beginning of the Jesus story where we see mangers and shepherds and sheep and kings with fancy presents. We don't usually put crosses anywhere on our Christmas tree, do we? Because the cross is the part of the Jesus story about which we don't feel so very 'festive.'

But the joy and the festivity of Christmas do fade quickly on our Christian calendar, don't they? Perhaps that's why so many people who come and worship around Christmas disappear until the next big celebration, Easter. Celebration is replaced with tension and drama. It was only last week or the week before that we read about Jesus narrow escape from the wrath of King Herod who ends up slaughtering children in Bethlehem. This "Slaughter of the Innocents" is really a prelude to the crucifixion. As a child Jesus escapes the murderous rampage of King Herod the Great, but he won't escape the murderous actions of Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate, or the Roman Empire. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all follow this storyline of Jesus traveling and healing and teaching, and there is a mounting tension as his enemies get more and more dangerous, and murderous as they plot to kill him. And when Jesus announces that he will go to Jerusalem for the coming Passover, we begin the season of Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday when we will have the symbol of the cross smeared on our foreheads as the pastor reminds us that "from dust you came, and to dust you will return." Then we proceed through Lent to the story of the Last Supper, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the torture, and the crucifixion.

And yet this very tragic story is also the greatest love story ever told. It tells of God's incredible love for people like you and me, and while the story begins at Christmas, it really gets rolling with the ministry of Jesus, and that ministry gets going with Jesus' baptism, and this is where I finally get to draw your attention once again to this wonderful artwork that Lorraine Poznak and my wife Hyesun have created for us today. A beautiful stream of water flowing to the triune candles symbolizing the eternal presence of God within us, around us, and among us. We have entered the Season of Epiphany which is an extremely important season of the Christian year as we explore the life and teachings of Jesus, because Christmas and Easter have no meaning apart from our familiarity with the person Jesus; if all you know about Jesus was that he was born, he died, and he resurrected then Christmas and Easter don't mean anything really. His miraculous birth and resurrection would be nothing more than little facts you'd see in the Guinness Book of World Records, and that is hardly a foundation of faith. And so we must know Jesus in order to "put meat on the bones" of Christmas and Easter, to give it all substance and meaning.

And we begin with baptism; *John's* baptism, a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And so it seems odd to John that Jesus comes up to him to get baptized. What's the point? It's like washing a new car. Jesus is clean already. He's the one who never sins. That's our faith, and that's what gives us the confidence to follow him in all things and to obey his commandments. Jesus is God's love in flesh and blood, so there is nothing better than perfect. So when John points out to Jesus that if anyone should baptize anyone, it should be Jesus baptizing John, to which Jesus replies, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

There are lots of ways that Jesus' words could be understood, but I'm going to take the angle that *by submitting to be baptized, Jesus was making clear God's intention to be in full solidarity with humanity*. In other words, Jesus did not want to draw attention to his distinctiveness; he wanted us to know that God is fully with us. That same message becomes clear to us at Christmas as we see God incarnating as a peasant child in a land occupied by a foreign army being subject to all the harsh realities that come from authoritarian rule – like having to travel over a hundred miles on a donkey when you're nine months pregnant and not being able to find a hospital let alone a hotel room when your water breaks. The same message is conveyed when Joseph and Mary and their young child must run away and seek refuge in a foreign land in order to escape an assassination orchestrated by their own head of state. Jesus is certainly not living the privileged life despite his relationship to the divine. And Jesus submits to the same baptism that any penitent sinner would submit to *and thus he connects to the penitent sinner*.

I like that. I was baptized when I was an infant, before I became aware of any need to repent of my sins, but when I finally *did* become aware of my own need to repent I was sure glad to know that Jesus was standing with me, that God was not some far-off entity that would get news of my repentance after all the necessary paperwork was filed. God was *not* a far-away entity. He was right there beside me in Christ Jesus. And when I laid my soul bare – and I've had to do that more than once as I've continued to take some bad turns in my life – but when I laid my soul bare and suffered the agony of my own sin it was love of God felt in the closeness of Jesus that turned my sorrow to joy and my mourning into dancing. And who knows; I may have that same experience a few more times in my life; we all might.

God connects to the penitent sinner in the most intimate way in Jesus. You know I have made a few friends in the ten years I've been here in Staten Island, and quite a few of them are people of other faith traditions. And I respect every faith tradition and I consider their beliefs to be absolutely valid. Muslims fully commit to serving God who they consider merciful and compassionate. Jews cherish and revere the Law of Moses because it was given to them by God himself, and the greatest way to honor God is to keep his laws. Hindus and Buddhists discipline themselves to be generous, pious, compassionate and dedicated to spiritual growth. I admire all these people and I believe that we all share the same Holy Spirit that led Jesus. But what makes me thankful for this faith tradition is the notion that God became like me. God became my brother, my friend. And God showed me what true love really looks like when he was beaten and crucified. Why? Because that's how God loves. To say that God is loving and compassionate is one thing; to see that love and that compassion in the agony of the cross is something far beyond that.

That is what I pray that a child experiences when they're baptized – to feel the intensity of God's love in that water that is brushed onto their foreheads. That's what grownups ought to feel when *they're* baptized; to feel the grace of God cleansing them and knowing all the while that Jesus is standing by smiling, and on behalf of the Father saying "You are *my* child, *my* beloved: In you I am well pleased."

And you and I have been chosen to be messengers of that love, that intense and perfect love of God, a love that conquers our fears and causes us to grow into people in whom God is well-pleased. That's our calling, and in all that we think, say, and do we should be conscious that that is our calling.