

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
January 12, 2014  
Baptism of our Lord Sunday  
[Matthew 3:13-17](#)

## “Baptism”

Good morning! It’s good to be back and to see all of you here. With the big snowfall last Sunday and my being on vacation the Sunday prior to that, I feel like it’s been a while since I have seen many of you.

Some of you may know that Terry and I usually spend the week between Christmas and January 1 clearing things out as we’re putting Christmas decorations away. There’s something about the New Year that compels me to clear out the clutter in our house. And, in a weird way, I actually look forward to the de-cluttering. Even though I really dislike routine cleaning, I rather like the type of cleaning that comes with purging stuff- “editing” Terry calls it. I like starting off the year clutter free. To me it represents a fresh start and a clean slate, a new beginning, if you will.

So it was with this mind set that I approached today’s reading from Matthew about Jesus being baptized by John. It’s a new year which means a new beginning and nothing symbolizes a new beginning more than a baptism does.

There aren’t many stories that all 4 of the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) all tell. Some people are surprised to learn this, that some of our favorite stories are only in 1 or two of the gospels-like the angel visiting Mary, for example. Only Luke tells that story. Or the Magi visiting the baby Jesus, only Matthew tells that one. Even the story of Jesus’ birth is only recorded in Matthew and Luke. But one story all 4 of them include is the story of Jesus’ baptism, which tells us that this must be an important story and one to pay attention to. Now don’t get me wrong, the gospel writers don’t record the story the same way. They all tell it with their own twist; but they all tell it, which means it’s a very significant story.

In Matthew, John protests when Jesus asks to be baptized. “No, no, no,” John says. “You shouldn’t be coming to me to be baptized. I should be coming to you.” We can almost hear the disbelief in John’s voice. “You’re coming to me?” John seems to be saying. “I baptize sinners; but you’re the Son of God! I baptize people as a sign of repentance to prepare for the coming kingdom. But you are the kingdom! You should not be coming to me to be baptized. I should be coming to you!”

But Jesus does come; in fact, he rather insists on John baptizing him. “Let it be so *now*,” he says.

The fact that Jesus went to John to be baptized has puzzled Christians for centuries. It has sometimes even embarrassed them. Because John only baptized sinners, people who needed to repent of something; folks who needed to change their ways and get straight with the Lord, so to speak. Why would Jesus, the Son of God, both human and divine, need to get straight with the Lord? Does he need to repent of something? Plus, John was inferior to Jesus; was considered lower than a servant. So why does Jesus go to John to be baptized?

Well, all of the gospel writers answer that question differently. Luke sidesteps the issue; Mark ignores it altogether; and John-as usual-has his own unique take. But Matthew answers it by saying it *has to be this way*. “We must do this to fulfill all righteousness”, Jesus tells the disbelieving John. In other words, if it’s God’s will that you should baptize me, then we must obey God. That’s Matthew’s answer for why Jesus is baptized by John.

But there is one point on which all the evangelists agree: and that is that baptism announces God’s favor and establishes Jesus’ identity. “This is my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased,” God says. All of them emphasize that Jesus is God’s Beloved Son.

Why would they all emphasize this? Well, I think the gospel writers want us to know that Jesus needed to hear it; he needed to hear he was God’s beloved son, because as he goes throughout his ministry, he’ll hear a lot of people say things to the contrary. He’ll hear people say he’s a phony; he’ll have to defend himself and his message; he’ll be called a liar and tried as a criminal; he’ll be declared guilty of that crime and crucified for it. But here at the beginning, when he needs to hear a word of affirmation and gather strength for his journey, he’s affirmed by God that he is God’s Beloved. You are my Son the beloved; you are my Son the Beloved; You are my Son, the Beloved; you are my Son, the Beloved. The point cannot be emphasized enough.

As Christian people, we take our understanding of baptism from this cue. You are my Son, you are my Daughter, my Beloved,” God tells us at our baptisms. And it’s a message that cannot be over emphasized enough, because we live in a culture that promises acceptance only if we are -- fill in the blank -- skinny enough, strong enough, successful enough, rich enough, popular enough, beautiful enough, young enough, and so on. The culture tells us that we need to be many things to be beloved; but in our baptisms God tells us quite simply that we are beloved for who we are, and that will suffice. And that is a message that cannot be emphasized enough.

Maybe when you were a child you heard through report cards that you weren’t smart enough. As a teenager, you might have heard the cruel voice of others tell you that you weren’t pretty enough or cool enough. As adults we hear voices tell us we’re not successful enough. We hear voices through the media telling us that our bodies are not attractive enough. Heck, even churches fall prey to the message-if you’re not big enough, you’re not good enough, we hear. Don’t ever let someone say you’re just a small church; you’re not just a small church; you’re a good church doing great things.

Yet somehow, as God's voice gets drowned out, we listen to these other voices, and we're tempted to forget who we are: God's beloved children and that more than suffices.

I recently heard a story about a man named Mario, who was once homeless but now lives in a church shelter. He'd lived half his life on the streets of NYC. He spent his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday with friends at a church dinner at the shelter. Many of them commented that he didn't look 60 years old. Responding to this comment, Mario pulled his birth certificate from his coat pocket to prove he was, indeed, 60 years old. But then he pulled from his other pocket his baptism certificate. It showed he was baptized as a baby at an Episcopal Church on the lower east side of Manhattan.

We might wonder why Mario would carry his baptism certificate with him everywhere he went, but maybe Mario knows something we don't, especially having lived on the streets of NYC where he was surely called many things but God's beloved son. Maybe Mario knows we need the reminder that we are God's beloved children when all the other voices are telling us otherwise.

Hearing that we are God's beloved children, and that that will suffice, is a message we cannot hear enough.

The great spiritual writer and Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, was once approached by a friend named Fred, who was a young secular New Yorker, and who asked Nouwen, "Why don't you write something about the spiritual life for me and my friends?" In answer to his friend, Nouwen wrote a book called "Life of the Beloved." In it, he writes this:

"Ever since you asked me to write for you and your friends about the spiritual life, I have been wondering if there might be one word I would most want you to remember .... It is the word "Beloved," and I am convinced that it has been given to me for the sake of you and your friends. Being a Christian, I first learned this word from the story of the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth.' He goes on to say, "Fred, all I want to say to you is, "You are the Beloved," and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold."

Nouwen then repeats words spoken by God throughout the Bible: "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness, and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch....I will not hide my face from you....You belong to me."

You are my beloved.

When we know we are beloved, like Jesus, we can be sent. We can be sent into the world with good news, knowing that we do not travel alone, knowing we are claimed and blessed.

When Jesus came to be baptized in the Jordan, John was surprised. And so we are all surprised. Why would Jesus come to the river? Why would Jesus wade into that water with everyone else?

So that God could say to a world in need, and to each of us: You are not alone. You are not alone. Do you hear me? You are my beloved, my child, the one I am sending into the world. With you I am well pleased.

It is a message that cannot be emphasized enough.

Amen.

Sources:

Christiane Lang, "When Jesus Was Baptized"

[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), "Dear Working Preacher" for January 12, 2014

Feasting on the Gospels, Pastoral Commentary for Matthew 3:3-17 by Patricia Calahan, pages 44-48.