

“The Beloved”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 13, 2019

First Sunday after Epiphany
Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Matthew 3:1-17
Rev. John Wahl

On this day eighteen years ago – maybe not this calendar day, but the same liturgical day; the first Sunday after Epiphany, when we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord – my son, AJ, was baptized. It took place at the church where I was working at the time: Anchorage Presbyterian in Louisville; my colleague led the service that day, so that I could stand in the role of the father of the baptized; to take part in the community’s baptismal promises offering to love, nurture, and support AJ.

In the sermon that day, the preacher likened AJ’s baptism to the opening scene of *The Lion King*, where the entire congregation of the animal kingdom is called to assemble below a cliff. Simba, a lion cub, has been born to the king and queen. The royal family stands before those gathered and the old, priestly baboon performs a ritual and anoints the newborn prince, lifting him high above his head as the crowd cheers in approval.

AJ’s birth and baptism had been a celebrated event at Anchorage church, as the congregation watched and waited for his birth, then jumped in to support us after he arrived. They had already been working on establishing an outreach ministry to parents of newborns, so our family became the test case; bringing church members into those early, intimate moments of parenthood. Sometimes, it meant people came almost too close; when I asked one woman who was scheduled to bring us a meal whether she needed directions, she said no, that she had already driven by our house before, just to “see our situation.”

Today, eighteen years later, as AJ is on his way back to college for his second semester, I have watched as those baptismal promises have come to fruition. At the College Conference we attended earlier this month, I listened to the ways his spirituality has grown through the nurture of the congregations he has been a part of, including this one. At school, he has joined a group of volunteers that helps to mentor young adults with special needs each Saturday morning. All of this is possible, I believe, because he was lifted up before his church community and heard a voice – or a multitude of voices – saying: this is my beloved.

The baptism of Jesus takes place in the River Jordan where people have been coming out to the wilderness to find his cousin John. John's fiery preaching demanded change: that in order to be baptized for the remission of sins, they needed to repent of their selfish and self-righteous ways. John was not there to promote the status quo religiosity of the day. And he was not there to promote himself, for there was someone coming who would be more powerful, more worthy, who will carry out God's prophetic plans.¹

According to John, the one who will come after him will judge people by the fruit that they bear, and not by their religious affiliation or pedigree. In fact, it is those who have the most reason to boast about their religious credentials that face the greatest danger of being cast into the fire. In one sense, John is correct: when Jesus describes judgement day, he envisions separating the sheep from the goats based on how they treated the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned; by the fruits of righteousness one bears.

But what John seems to misunderstand is his depiction of Jesus as a savior that wields the ax of destruction, burning everything in his wake. John expects a messiah who will use violence to wield power, but what he gets is a humble Jesus who willingly submits himself to John in baptism – and ultimately to dying on a cross for the sake of us all.²

Like John, we can also misunderstand Jesus and the nature of his authority, and run the risk of believing that power must be violent in its nature and so might makes right. We, too, can live our lives by calling others vipers that are unworthy of God's kingdom. Sometimes, we can even believe ourselves to be unworthy of the callings to which we have been called; that because we have not produced enough good fruit, God is looking to chop us down and throw us into the fire.

But this is not the God that is revealed in this story of Jesus' baptism; who voluntarily wades into the same waters as everyone else who had come out to see John; upon whom the dove of peace descends and about whom the voice of the Lord proclaims to be well-pleased.

Jesus' public ministry will not begin until later in Matthew, chapter 4, after Jesus has been sent to the wilderness for a period of temptation. We do not believe baptism offers us an insurance policy: as if nothing else will ever challenge a baptized individual again. "If there is any comparison between Jesus' baptism and ours," writes Karoline Lewis, "it's that baptism assumes wilderness. Not to test our

¹ John Dobbs, "You Brood of Vipers"

² Robert Willimson, Jr., "Misunderstanding Jesus"

loyalty. Not to tempt God's commitment...Being baptized and then immediately being thrown into the wilderness is about faith lived in community."³

It is worth remembering that the Israelites did not spend their time in the wilderness alone but had God and each other along for the journey. Jesus was also not in the wilderness alone; the Spirit remained with him. And we are also never alone. Our baptism brings us into a family of people who have committed to nurture and love one another; each of us are held aloft by the high priest as if we were the long-awaited child of the king and queen of the entire animal kingdom. Jesus, who offers the example of baptism by choosing to wade into the waters, also reveals to us how deeply God cares for us; enough to be incarnated as one of us, to enter the wilderness like each of us, and to proclaim that – as one of God's family members – we are never alone.

When Jack was born, I was working at a different church, and rather than standing as the father of the baptized, I took on the role of the minister officiating the baptism. The date was not this one, liturgically, but instead the first Sunday after Easter, when we often tell the story of the Emmaus Road – where the disciples walking with Jesus on the evening of the resurrection are met by a stranger; and though amazed by his teaching, did not recognize that it was Jesus until they invited him to stay the night and they broke bread together.

And so, in this second of my children's baptisms, for Jack, I was the one who had the privilege of sprinkling him with water; water that – like the bread when it is broken – becomes something more than it was before it has been blessed for God's saving purposes. In baptism, ordinary water takes on extra-ordinary power; it becomes living water as we are sealed with the sign of God's love forever.

Jack uses lots of sign language: some of them are universal, signs that are recognizable to those who have learned ASL. Others are signs that he has invented for himself, and – as we say – are done with particular flair. Jack has two signs for water: the first is fairly gentle, one finger drawing a line down the chest; a sign he uses interchangeably for water, wet, rain, drink, milk, and other related words. But the second sign is much more demonstrative: a loud hit across his chest; something that definitely gets your attention, and sometimes even leaves a mark.

This is similar to the ways that I think about baptism. Most times, it is a gentle memory of a combination of different meanings: being washed clean, welcomed into community, given promises of nurture and love. At other times, though, we are reminded of our baptism, and the wilderness that follows, in

³ Karoline Lewis, "You Are All My Beloved"

dramatic ways. We might need to think about God saying to us, “this is my beloved” at those times when we feel most unworthy or alone; when we question whether we are really up to the calling to which we have been called. I assume that anyone who is a parent has had that feeling; like on those days when you’re wishing that the kids’ bedtime would arrive because you’re so tired yourself. Baptism, knowing that we are beloved by God regardless of anything we may or may not have done, is so important to remember when we feel unworthy, unlovable, or alone.

John went out to the wilderness, calling on people to repent; preparing the way for Jesus. When Jesus came, he gave the message John expected, but in a very different way. Jesus came not to cut people down, but to lift them up; not to separate the grain from the chaff, but to join people together in community.

And so, we are called to remember not only the promises made for us at our baptisms, but also the promises we make for others. These are promises about who others need you to be for them: to be present in their wilderness moments and remind them that they are not alone; to be teachers of their children; to be sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles in Christ. Baptism cannot just be about the self, but it is about living life in community. For you – plural, the whole people of God – are God’s beloved children. Remember your baptism, dearly beloved, and give thanks. Amen.