

January 13, 2019  
Baptism of the Lord

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“My Beloved, My Own”  
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Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. John answered them saying, "I am baptizing you in water, but someone is coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not fit to untie! This One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. A winnowing-fan is in his right hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff will be burnt in unquenchable fire."*

*When all the people were baptized, Jesus also came to be baptized. And while Jesus was praying, the skies opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on the Anointed One in visible form, like a dove. A voice from heaven said, "You are my Own, my Beloved. On you, my favor rests."*

*This is the Word of the Lord*

*Thanks, Be to God*

## ***My Beloved, My Own***

*"Long before we chose God, God chose us."*

In central Florida, where I grew up, there is a vast network of rivers and springs that run through the often densely wooded landscape. As kids we were always taught two important things about these waters: Assume every body of fresh water has alligators in it, and if you find yourself at an unfamiliar place in the woods, return to the river, it will lead you home.

I don't know about you, but I've been feeling a little lost lately like the landscape is shifting and suddenly it doesn't feel as familiar as it did just a short while ago. This is the place where we find the people of God in both of our texts this morning. In Isaiah, our ancient ancestors seek words of comfort from The Divine in the midst of their time of exile; later, their descendants watch and wait for the Messiah, filled with questions and uncertainty. Like the ancient ones, we are surrounded by uncertainty and filled with questions. We are no longer sure of the path we are walking. Nothing is familiar.

It seems like a good moment to return to the river.

So that is what we do today. We come to the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized, where John has been preparing the way for Jesus's arrival.

In the part of the text, we didn't read this morning, John finds himself in prison, his life in jeopardy, after speaking the unwelcome truth to a powerful king. This is one of those moments, early in the story of Jesus where we get a sense that things might not always be comfortable or easy for those who bear the message of the coming Reign of God. In fact, this is a dangerous journey, marked by suffering and peril. Luke's account of these events offers us two important messages: Life is uncertain, and you are beloved by God. It is foundational to our faith, this idea that we are claimed and loved, and called by God. That is why every year, right at the beginning of things, we return to the sacrament of baptism, entering the waters to be, as Father Michael Marsh puts it, "bathed by the Holy Spirit, to let the name 'beloved' wash over us."

It's important that we pause to take in this moment at the river: the dove, the open heavens, the voice of God calling God's own human child beloved. Strange though it may be, this scene is important because baptism is only the starting point of a treacherous journey. The real work for us happens when we set out to follow God's call, and the call of God is not an easy thing to follow. We

understand this by seeing what happens in Jesus's own story after he is baptized: wilderness and wandering, temptation, questions, rejection, persecution, crucifixion.

The path that Jesus walks is not just a story of how the savior moves from incarnation to resurrection. It is a template for what the journey of faith will look like – for all of us. The words spoken by Holy Spirit at the baptism of Jesus echo the words of comfort from the Prophet Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I have claimed you; I have called you by name; you are mine." This is what we affirm together when we remember our own baptisms, that long before we chose God, God chose us. God chose us. God has called us. God is with us. We see from the Gospel witness that being chosen and beloved by God doesn't mean that we won't suffer. We also see that the opposite is true – when we are in the depths of suffering and trials, God is right here with us.

God loves us still.

Elie Wiesel, in his memoir, *Night*, recalls a moment in the Nazi death camps when he and others were forced to witness the hanging of a young Jewish boy. As the boy struggled on the gallows, someone in the gathered crowd began to whisper, "Where is God? Where is He? Where is this Merciful God?" Wiesel remembers asking the same question in his own heart, "Where is God??" Then he heard a voice softly within him saying,

"He is there, hanging in the gallows, where else?"

Frederick Douglass once said, "Blessed are they to whom is given the instinct to tell that God is on the field even when God is most invisible!"

We may find ourselves in many unfamiliar places along the journey of faith. When we feel lost, when we feel as though God is invisible, we must return to the river. It is there that we may draw upon the gift of our baptism into the community of faith. These waters "[Do not] eliminate our difficulties. [They do] not fix our problems or take away our pain, or change the circumstances of our lives. Instead, they change us" (Father Michael Marsh, *Interrupting the Silence* 2010). Water has a powerful ability to do that.

As a church staff, when we are going through a particularly hectic or stressful season, Amy will invite us to share with one another what it is that helps keep us focused on the present moment, and aware of the presence of God. Often, the answer is water: The vastness of the ocean, the feeling of rain, the sound of a

spring emerging from the depth of the earth. All of this is right there in the symbol of the water we use in our baptism. It is the visible sign that we are part of something that is bigger than any one of us on our own, and it reminds us that while life is uncertain, painful, and full of despair, we are beloved, and belong to God.

Today, we are in the thick of things. We are living in a moment where the journey is not an easy one. Our country, our culture, our community may feel like a very unfamiliar landscape to us right now, and we carry the weight of this reality with us everywhere we go. In light of all we are carrying, as a nation, as a worshipping community, and in our own lives, this is the perfect Sunday to return to the water, to let go of that which weighs us down and to immerse ourselves the presence of God. If we can do that, then we may yet hear the voice of the Divine all around us whispering,

“You are precious. I love you. You are mine.”

As we go forward, no matter what happens, we can return to this truth. This is our river, and it will lead us to knowledge of the love of God. Whatever we are experiencing, when we return to the water, we can rely on it to carry us back to the present moment, and that is where God’s love will find us.

Amen.