

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Sarah Freyermuth

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Today, as Jesus rises up from the Jordan River, as the heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, we get our first look at Jesus as an adult in the Gospel of Matthew. Just the chapter before he was a child in Nazareth! The huge time jump in Matthew's Gospel can feel abrupt, can make it seem at first glance like Jesus simply appeared one day at the Jordan River, fully-formed and ready to begin his ministry.

But if we go back to the beginning of Matthew, we'll see that this glorious moment of God claiming Jesus didn't just happen, but was the culmination of a journey that began long before Jesus was ever born.

Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy that connects Jesus all the way back to Abraham, naming the long list of people whose actions created the world Jesus was born into, whose stories shaped his self-understanding, whose faith made it possible for him to arrive at this moment on the banks of the Jordan River. And then, Matthew goes on to tell us of the story we heard right before Christmas—of Joseph, a righteous man who risked his reputation and safety to ensure that Jesus could live out God's purpose. Next, Matthew tells us of the magi we celebrated last week, who believed in Jesus and protected him, who took the risk to defy Herod and provided gifts that made Jesus' escape to Egypt possible. And then Matthew tells us of this escape to Egypt, that story we heard about the week after Christmas, of Mary

and Joseph fleeing in the night, surely relying on the hospitality of unnamed strangers to survive.

As Matthew's version of events makes clear, Jesus does not simply appear at the Jordan River one day. Jesus arrives at the Jordan River because a whole community of people – some named and many unnamed – loved God deeply enough to take risks, to protect the vulnerable, to ensure that Jesus could survive, could one day come to be baptized by John.

What happens before Jesus' baptism is incredibly important, because Jesus did not and could not have gotten there alone. But what happens after is just as important to examine.

Immediately after his baptism, Matthew writes that Jesus is led into the wilderness. And after spending 40 long days and nights in that wilderness, tempted by the devil, Jesus discovers that John the Baptist has been arrested by those who will soon persecute him. Baptism does not shield Jesus from the wilderness. Baptism does not shield Jesus from the threat of empire. But baptism does prepare him for it.

You see, Matthew is the only Gospel that describes Jesus' baptism as a public declaration. In the other Gospels, the voice from heaven speaks directly to Jesus, but in our Gospel today, we see the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend like a dove and a voice from heaven publicly proclaiming "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

God names Jesus out loud, before the world, declaring who he is and to whom he belongs. Before Jesus begins his public ministry, before Jesus is forced into the wilderness, God names him. Jesus' identity, Jesus' belovedness, comes before his ministry. And that order matters, for Jesus and for us.

That order matters because just like Jesus, we do not simply arrive at baptism randomly or on our own. Some of us have been baptized for years, carried by families and sponsors who promised to love and nurture us in faith. Some of us may be preparing for baptism. And some of us may be here simply because we were invited, because we were looking for a community that would allow us to explore and have doubts and ask honest questions.

But all of us are here because of relationships, because we have felt the Holy Spirit moving through us, through the long history of people who have shaped us and taught us and cared for us. This is why in our baptismal liturgy; the congregation promises to support and nurture the baptized. Because baptism was never meant to be a private act. In claiming Jesus publicly within a community of people like John, who would go on to be important to his life and his ministry, God is demonstrating that baptism is meant to be a communal promise, that baptism is meant to be a shared responsibility, that baptism is meant to be a recognition that the body of Christ can only be sustained, can only thrive when community chooses to show up for one another again and again.

And, that order also matters because just like Jesus, our baptism does not spare us from wilderness or the empire.

As I think we can all attest, life very often feels like wilderness. It certainly feels like we are in the wilderness right now. When I look around and see innocent people detained for no other reason than the color of their skin, when I look around and see innocent families ripped apart for no other reason than arbitrary human borders, when I look around and see innocent mothers murdered by ICE for no other reason than to maximize cruelty, all I see is wilderness. All I see is the same logic of empire that arrested John and hung Jesus on the cross all those years ago. And on top of the wilderness we see all around us, each of us also deals with our own periods of wilderness within us: the loss of a loved one that leaves us feeling hollow and alone, the unexpected diagnosis that throws us into a tailspin, the constant anxiety of making ends meet and wondering how much longer we can keep going. We all understand the pain and fear and exhaustion that Jesus must have felt in the wilderness.

When we're surrounded by wilderness, it's easy to lose track of who we are, to listen to the voices of the world telling us that we're alone, disposable, or forgotten. It's easy to let fear define us, to get stuck, to let the world decide our identity for us.

A few months ago, Pastor Jason and I attended a conference where Bishop Regina Hassanally of the Southeastern Minnesota Synod gave an incredible keynote presentation about baptism. And she asked us two questions that have really been sticking with me as I've looked around at the wilderness lately. First she asked us, "what do you understand that your baptism says about you?" So, I'll ask you to pause and think about that for a moment. What do you understand that your baptism says about you?

Our Gospel today helps provide us that answer. Because in it, we are reminded that just as God publicly claimed Jesus, God claims each and every one of us. Just as God named Jesus beloved, God names each and every one of us beloved. Our baptism says that we are loved, not because of who we are or what we have done but because of who God is. Our baptism says that when we are surrounded by wilderness, when we feel like the world around us is ending, the one thing that will never end is God's love for us. Our baptism says that when we are surrounded by wilderness and we begin to forget who we are, we are reminded that we are God's children, that nothing can or will ever take that away. Our baptism says that when we are surrounded by wilderness, we can remain grounded in the knowledge that we are first and foremost beloved.

And then Bishop Hassanally asked us a second question: she asked "How much of your understanding of yourself comes from something other than the voice of God breaking through the heavens and proclaiming a baptismal truth?" And so siblings, I ask you all to think about the same question: "How much of your understanding of yourself comes from something other than the voice of God breaking through the heavens and proclaiming a baptismal truth?"

I think Bishop Hassanally was not simply asking us a question, she was issuing us a challenge. She was challenging us to think about how often, within the wilderness, we allow our self-understanding to come from the world, instead of from God. And more than that, she was challenging us to consider what actions, what type of life our baptismal identity calls us toward.

You see just as baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' public life of ministry, baptism marks a beginning for us. When we affirm our baptism in the ELCA we promise "to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth." Our baptismal identity calls us to declare our allegiance to God's kingdom, which does not belong to empire, to violence, or to exclusion. Our baptismal identity calls us to resist any power of this world that seeks to dehumanize God's children. And our baptismal identity calls us to protect the vulnerable, to resist injustice, and to participate in God's work of liberation together. In our reading from Isaiah today we hear of a servant who is called to refuse to grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice on earth, a servant who is called to open eyes and free prisoners. But before all of that, we hear that this servant is upheld and chosen by God, that God's spirit delights in him. It is this baptismal promise, this status of being chosen and beloved that equips the servant not to grow faint, that equips Jesus to resist temptation in the wilderness, and that makes it possible for each and every one of us, even amidst this wilderness, to work tirelessly toward a future where all of God's people live in justice and peace.

And thanks be to God that just as Jesus' baptism was not an individual moment, neither is ours. Instead our baptism calls us to belong to God and one another, to nurture one another in faith and in deed, and to hold one another up so that none of us will grow faint or be crushed by this world. Our baptism calls us to be a baptismal community that takes risks for one another, that opens eyes and frees prisoners, that through our actions demonstrates that belovedness and justice will always overcome empire and evil.

Today, as Jesus rises from the waters of the Jordan River, the heavens are opened not only for him, but for us. And we can still hear that voice echoing over 2000 years later, saying “This is my beloved.”

May we remain rooted in that voice always. May our belovedness give us the strength to work toward the world of justice and peace that God longs for. And may we be that voice in the wilderness calling out “you are beloved” for one another. **Amen.**