

"MY BELOVED"

Matthew 3:11-17

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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How many ways did you use water this morning? A drink, a bath or a shower, brush your teeth, flush the toilet, make coffee, cook breakfast, fill the water dish for the cat or dog- or the chickens.

We can't live without water. You can actually last for three awful weeks without food. But without water you will last only about three days. Did you know that the human body is sixty percent water and seventy percent of our earth is covered by water?

Water can be both life-giving and life-threatening. Too much water is as dangerous as too little. It is essential to the survival of every living thing on this planet. Lack of clean water is one of the leading causes of disease and poverty for millions of people around the world. Some scientists believe that water will be the most important and most disputed commodity in the future.

We already see communities fighting giant corporations, like Nestle, who want the rights to their water supplies so they can drain the aquifers, bottle it, and sell it back to them.

When we have enough water we think nothing of it and we often waste it. When we don't have enough that's all we think about and we conserve every single drop.

Water is important in scripture. It is mentioned in the *Genesis* creation story on both the second and third days. It is described as both a means of deliverance- as Moses led the Israelites out of slavery through the Red Sea- and a means of destruction- as the great flood covered the earth and Noah and his floating zoo remained safe.

So it is no surprise that water would play such an important role in the story of Jesus. Like us, he was born through the life-giving waters of birth and as an adult he came to the river and requested baptism from his cousin, John.

John the Baptizer had been raising quite a ruckus in those days- calling people to repent of their sins and be baptized into new life with God. People came from everywhere and lined up along the Jordan River to be put under the water and rise up as new creations. John was a prophet who preached a tough message. He told the people that they weren't living up to their commitment to God.

He saved some of his strongest language for the religious leaders- calling them hypocrites and snakes.

Over and over again he told the crowds that he was just the opening act, he was paving the way for God's Messiah. I wonder how many of them really believed him- after all, he was such a larger than life character- how could anyone else be bigger than he was?

John had actually been the prophet of his cousin, Jesus, since before they were born. When his mother, Elizabeth, greeted her cousin Mary in the early months of their pregnancies, John leapt in her womb.

As an adult, John spent his whole life expecting Jesus to show up and one day he did. Maybe John wasn't totally surprised to see him there, standing in line with everyone else on the riverbank. But he was surprised by Jesus' request.

"I have come to be baptized by you," Jesus said to his cousin. John couldn't believe it. "Are you kidding me? I need to be baptized by you! You are the Messiah and I am nobody."

"You are not nobody," Jesus said, "*God's work, putting things right all these centuries is coming together right now in this baptism.*" (*The Message*)

So John did it. He led Jesus into the water and immersed him just like he did with everyone else. But when Jesus came up from the water, dripping wet, something unique happened. The heavens opened and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, rested upon Jesus. And a voice came from heaven, "*This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, the delight of my life.*" (*The Message*)

Do you know what happened next? The Holy Spirit whisked Jesus off to the wilderness to be tested by the devil. And then he began his public ministry.

John's baptism of Jesus has raised controversy in the church since there has been a church. Critics claim that if John was baptizing for repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, how could he baptize Jesus who was supposed to be without sin? People have argued about this for centuries. I think there are three important reasons for Jesus' baptism. First: It was a symbol of his total immersion in human life. Second: It was his ordination into ministry. Third: It was the public confirmation of his identity. Jesus was marked that day not just by the water but also by the voice of God.

The story of Jesus' baptism is told in different ways by all four gospels. Each gospel writer was writing for a particular audience, for a particular reason. Matthew was a Jew writing for Jewish Christians. The people in his congregation were trying to figure out how

to connect their Jewish heritage and traditions with their newfound Christian faith. Matthew's favorite verb is "fulfilled."

He uses this word over and over again to show how Jesus is connected to the long history of God's people. For Matthew, Jesus doesn't come to abolish the Law of Moses and the Prophets and to start all over with a clean slate. He comes to fulfill them, to expand them, to embody them, to show the people how God's word continues to live and breathe in them and in their lifetime.

Matthew's theological purpose is to show that being a Christian means being a pupil of Jesus. The mission of the church is to go out into the world and enable others to follow the living Christ. Everything Matthew writes is written to meet these goals.

The first words we hear Jesus speak in the first Gospel are those he speaks to John when John balks at baptizing him. *"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."* He tells John that his baptism is a way to **fulfill** God's plan. Even though Jesus is the embodiment of God's reign on earth, he couldn't baptize himself. He needed John's help. Imagine what a blessing that was for John.

As Jesus comes up out of the water everyone standing there by the Jordan River saw the heavens open and a dove come down and land on him. Matthew tells us this was the Holy Spirit. Then they hear the voice of God identify Jesus as "My beloved son with whom I am well pleased." Matthew doesn't leave any room for question- the identity of Jesus is confirmed and affirmed in front of everyone. I am pretty sure Jesus already knew who he was and needed no public announcement. So this revelation was for the people who witnessed his baptism- and for those hearing or reading Matthew's words. From the very beginning of his gospel, Matthew tells them who Jesus is.

Tom Long writes, *"The central purpose of the story of Jesus' baptism is to draw together the threads of Jesus' identity that have been woven into the fabric of Matthew's Gospel thus far. We have learned that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham, the light to the Gentiles, the Nazorean, and the judge at the end of time. Now these elements are fused and shown to be even more than the sum of their parts: Finally and ultimately, Jesus is greater than any one of these descriptions; he is the beloved Son of God, with whom God is well pleased."*

*In Mark and Luke, the voice seems to speak to Jesus alone, **You** are my Son." In Matthew, however, the heavenly voice declares Jesus' identity publicly, **This** is my Son." In Matthew the emphasis falls on Jesus' identity being declared openly to the whole world. Now all can see who Jesus truly is." (1)*

Up to this point in Matthew's Gospel Jesus is passive. He is born, visited by foreigners, hunted by King Herod, whisked to safety in the dead of night, and taken by his parents to Nazareth. Now for the first time he speaks and he acts. And no sooner is he baptized than he is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. (We'll hear more about this next week.) As soon as his identity is affirmed and he is ordained for ministry he is taken into the wilderness where he faces three temptations by the devil. Only after he has faced down temptation does he begin his ministry.

As important as baptism was for Jesus I am aware of no story in scripture where he baptizes anyone. Isn't that a surprise? He heals, teaches, feeds, corrects, criticizes, holds, touches, and preaches but he never baptizes.

We practice Believer's Baptism in the Church of the Brethren. We don't baptize babies, but baptize people when they are old enough to make the decision to be a disciples of Jesus Christ for themselves.

One of the things I love about our manner of baptizing is the sheer abundance of it. We don't sprinkle or pour- we drench! I put you under the water- the whole way- three times. When you get baptized here, there isn't a smidgen of you that isn't waterlogged. I usually get splashed pretty well too. What a great reminder of the audacious, abundance of God.

I have never seen a dove come down from heaven and alight on anyone I have baptized, but that doesn't mean that the Spirit of God isn't present. Just because we don't hear the voice of God saying out loud, "This is my Beloved" doesn't mean it isn't true. Like Jesus, our baptisms also confirm our identity as the beloved of God. Our baptism is also our ordination into the priesthood of all believers. The waters of baptism mark us for ministry and send us out to fulfill our calling from God.

Baptism is important, not because it is our ticket into heaven, but because it is a rite of passage on our journey of faith. It is a reminder to us that we are, indeed, the beloved of God and that we too are called to ministry.

It is a reminder that we are loved and supported by the family of faith. Baptism is not a private event- it is an act of worship, a public promise to continue the work of Jesus.

Whether you were baptized as an infant in another church or dunked three times you are the beloved of God. Whether you have no memory of your baptism or remember every moment of it, you are the beloved of God. No matter how long ago it was- and even if it hasn't happened yet- you are the beloved of God.

My prayer is that somehow and someday, each one of us will hear the voice of God call our name and say, "*This is my child, chosen and marked by my love, the delight of my life and I will use you to change the world.*"

May it be so.

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P.34.*