

## There Must Be Something in the Water

Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 3:21-22

*Baptism of the Lord/ 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019*

“Welcome to the life of the church.” That’s what I say to an infant (or child or adult, usually an infant) after being baptized. It’s how we often think about baptism, as initiation into the church—emphasis on *church*, the community of God’s people. John Calvin (1509-1564) himself said, “Baptism is a sign of initiation, by which we are admitted into the society of the Church, in order that, being incorporated into Christ, we may be numbered among the children of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, I certainly don’t want to contradict Calvin. And I don’t want the heresy police coming to my study or people questioning my theological orthodoxy, but there’s a problem here. There’s something missing with a one-sided view of baptism. The problem comes into focus when we take this initiation-into-church view of baptism and then read the accounts of Jesus’ own baptism. The dilemma is staring right at us. Was baptism as initiation-into-church true for Jesus when Jesus, himself, wasn’t baptized into a church? And he certainly wasn’t baptized *by* the church. John the Baptist wasn’t out in the wilderness baptizing Jews into the Christian church. At Jesus’ time, baptism was a ritual used by radical Jews who were fed up with the abuses of the religious authorities in Jerusalem, who wanted to be purified or cleansed of those abuses to be more fully faithful to the ways of God. Those who went out to see John in the wilderness didn’t want to be associated with the Temple community in Jerusalem; they wanted to separate themselves from it, distance themselves from the Temple and the Temple’s alliance with Roman Imperial authorities. Instead, those seeking baptism wanted to identify themselves with *God*.

When we read the account of Jesus’ baptism in this light, setting aside our churchy view of initiation, we begin to see that for Jesus baptism was less about initiation, than it was *identification*. It was about *identity*—Jesus’ identity as the son of God and being identified with God’s mission or kingdom in the world. In his baptism—going down under the water and coming up out of the water—Jesus participated in a profound ritual that helped him come to grips with who he was. In these waters Jesus was aligning himself with the Baptist’s mission of radical reform, of the need to focus more clearly upon ways of God. When Jesus came up out of the water, he entered a new life, determined to embody his call and embark on the mission and purpose of his life. After his baptism, Luke tells us, while he and the others who had been baptized were praying, the Holy Spirit “descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’ (Lk. 3:22). *You are my beloved Son. You are my beloved.* A designation of identity. Therefore, “With *you* I am well-pleased.” Can you hear this in your heart? Can you feel it?

In this divine declaration we begin to see that being baptized has something to do with identity, with who we really are in the core of our being. It seems to me that we also discover something about what our baptism can mean for us, whether or not we remember being baptized. What we discover when we consider the meaning of our baptism, not into the Church, but into our call as people of God, is something akin to what Jesus discovered about himself in the waters

of his baptism. It's a designation of identity. Baptism tells us who we are. Not that we are mini-Messiahs, because we're not, but that a similar designation—*Beloved*—belongs to us as God's children. It's a designation, a claim, and identity that we need help remembering all our lives. This means that baptism is never an event that occurs once in our lives (whether as infant, child, or adult), and then we move on, but an event, or, better, a truth that we need to live *into* day after day, year after year.

During the stress and strain of the Reformation, attacked on all sides, Martin Luther (1483-1546) took great comfort in knowing he was baptized. He would repeat to himself, over and over, "Remember your baptism. Remember your baptism. Remember who you are." Luther said of baptism that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes our entire lives to complete.<sup>2</sup> He's correct. We're not "done" and then we're "in." It's an experience that yields saving, personal knowledge. And the knowledge we gain of ourselves in baptism, when we come to see who we really are, a knowledge that takes a lifetime to fathom and acknowledge and live out and really claim to be true in our heart of hearts is like what Jesus learned in the divine declaration, the truth that defined and determined his mission, and it's this: we too are beloved children of God, daughters of God, sons of God, with whom God is well-pleased. Your name is Beloved—Beloved Child.

I wonder, though, why is it so difficult to hear this, to accept this, to believe this? I believe it's truly tragic that someone can spend their entire life in the church and never hear this, never able to accept it, never able to view themselves this way, as Beloved. Sometimes we know, but then we forget, and we need help remembering. Sometimes we hear other messages, voices that tell us something else, voices from family members, or at school, at work that tell us we're something else—unwanted, unaccepted, unlovable. Or it might be those negative, piercing voices of judgment and recrimination that we say to ourselves, the voices that are less than kind or compassionate or graceful. We're surrounded by a cacophony of voices competing for our attention.

Who tells you who you are? Who has the authority to tell you who you really are? Who grounds your identity? Do we look to our families, our neighbors, our friends to tell us who we are? Your colleagues at work? Your boss? Is it the culture with its distorted drives and wayward passions that we turn to guidance? There's no way to live apart from these voices. But we need to remember that there's only one voice that truly counts, only one who speaks with authority, only one who knows you—through and through—the only one who can tell you who you really are.

Several years ago, we saw *The Lion King* on Broadway. Amazing production; amazing show; amazing story, really. There's one scene in which Simba—son of the great king of Pride Rock, a son in exile from his father who lost his way without the courage to fulfill his life's mission—receives a visitation by Rafiki, a priestess offering wise counsel. Rafiki is a Swahili word for "friend," related to an Arabic word for "companion." She's a kind of Holy Spirit-like figure offering guidance to Rafiki. She tells him to look at his reflection in the waters of creation, to see himself and to remember who he really is—he's the son of the king. Rafiki sings,

*He watches over  
Everything we see*

*Into the water  
Into the truth  
In your reflection  
He lives in you.*<sup>3</sup>

Simba begins to see a vision of his father long dead who speaks words of assurance, of affirmation, of identification, like what Jesus heard from the Spirit: Remember who you are.

When we are in exile and far from home,  
when we have lost our way in the world,  
when the future looks scary,  
when nothing seems to make any sense,  
when the pressures and anxieties and pain and immense sorrow of the  
world overwhelm us, and we forget our place in the universe,  
Jesus invites us back—again and again—to the waters,  
the waters of new creation,  
to remember who we are.

But it's so easy to forget. That's why we need people who love us and remind us who we are. It's also what the church does when the church is really being the church: we remind each other who we are. You're a beloved child of God. That's what a sacrament is meant to do, it helps us remember. That's what we need to hear whispered in our ears whenever we approach a baptismal font, whether it's this baptismal font or any other font anywhere in the world.

When the great St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226) was called by Christ in a vision to enter a world of poverty and care for the poor, his father, Francesco, a leading public figure in the town of Assisi, Italy, was furious. His father publicly shamed Francis in the public square. And Francis shamed his father for taking his call seriously. Francis lived in a small hut in the plains below the town of Assisi (you can still go there today). When he had to walk up the hill to town, he was deeply fearful of meeting his father in the street. His father cursed at him publicly and rejected him again and again as his son. Francis carried a lot of guilt about this and the relationship with his father remained broken for the rest of his life. One day Francis had to go up into town and feeling fearful, invited a beggar from the streets to join him. He invited the beggar to walk by his side and protect him. And Francis instructed him, "When my father hurls curses and abuses at me, I will hear them painfully in one ear, but I ask you to walk on my other side, and whisper God's favor into my other ear, 'Francis, you are my beloved son. You are a son of heaven and a son of God.' Just keep repeating it until I can believe it again."<sup>4</sup>

That's what our baptism continues to say to us today. The font reminds us who we are. In its waters we see our reflections. Here we discover our true names. Rachel Held Evans said it so well. "The great struggle of the Christian life is to take God's name for us, to believe we are beloved and to believe that is enough." That's the only voice and the only name we need to hear. Against the many competing voices telling us otherwise, we need to hear the voice of truth, and hear it repeated in our ears again and again, until we believe it and know it. At the font, God's Spirit whispers to us again and again, and won't stop until we really believe it, know it, feel it in our souls: *You are my child. My daughter. My son. You are my beloved.*

One final thing, this identity...it's never an end in itself. It's important to know who we are so that we can faithfully live out our lives, serving God, and fulfilling the purpose of our lives. The well-loved poet Mary Oliver died this past week. She knew who she was as a child of God and lived out her life to the fullest. She said, "Love yourself. Then forget it. And love the world."<sup>5</sup> Indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), Book IV, XV,1.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Anthony Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 2003), 37. The French Confession (1559), written by Calvin, says, "We hold...that although we are baptized only once, yet the gain that it symbolizes to us reaches over our whole lives and to our death, so that we have a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification."

<sup>3</sup> *The Lion King*, Music and Lyrics by Elton John & Tim Rice.

<sup>4</sup> "Legend of the Three Companions," *St. Francis of Assisi Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, cited in Richard Rohr, *Wild Man to Wise Man: Reflections on Male Spirituality* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), 78.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver, *Evidence: Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).