

Baptism of Our Lord

Matthew 3:13-17

A sermon from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
January 8th, 2023
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Our text from Matthew's gospel recounts the baptism of Jesus. John-the-Baptist is all wound-up in full preacher-mode, stomping around in the River Jordan calling his listeners a brood of vipers. We hear the rushing of water and the murmur of the enthralled crowd.

As a young minister, I liked wading into these waters.

I liked preaching this text.

I liked wagging my finger in the faces of my beloved flock and calling them a brood of vipers, a pit of snakes, a bunch of sinners. One of my friends in my first congregation—and old and wise man—suggested that, perhaps, I enjoyed that finger-wagging a bit too much. I couldn't have gotten away with calling my friends a bunch of snakes every week, but I sure loved doing it when this text rolled around at least every January.

I still do.

We read how the heavens open up above Jesus' head and God's words swirl out like a tornado, with the rip and roar of divinity. This is love's disaster to the status quo. *"This is my beloved son with whom I am well-pleased."*

Here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the gospel writers (all of them tell this story) underscore how this ordinary man from Nazareth, a carpenter's son, is has long been set apart, called out, and marked to be the Messiah, God's especially chosen one. And it's not John the Baptist or a frenzied crowd of human snakes who do the setting apart. It is God. God sets Jesus apart from the beginning—this one begotten not made/ light from very light. The heavens open and Jesus is here anointed by the voice of God.

We hear and believe God's voice, still: This Jesus is somebody to keep an eye on.

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Today we dare to ordain, install, and commission a handful of ordinary folk to the offices of Elder and Deacon. They come in the footsteps of the one who hailed from the town of Nazareth. And they—these whom God has called through your voice—are set apart for their service today not by the rending of God's heavens and God's movie voice, but with the laying on of hands—your hands. We pray our touch confers God's blessing.

What these people are being commissioned for is specific forms of service in this congregation: they will take on specific leadership duties in our mission work, in the emotional and spiritual care of our flock, and in other duties related to our worship, service, and mission.

You are called to the same sorts of duties. They will be the ones helping to coordinate our very important work. They are no better than the rest of us, no more or less holy than the rest of us, and no more important. But they are stepping up in official ways to be hands-on in the governance of this congregation.

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Jesus' baptism is a little confusing. If baptism is symbolic of the washing away of sins, what sins did Jesus commit that needed to be washed away? Why is Jesus getting baptized in the first place? John doesn't even understand: *Shouldn't YOU be baptizing ME?*

What is clear is baptism marks a new beginning. The old is washed away and we are stepping into a new day. And the fact that God's son submitted himself to baptism suggests that God has chosen to identify with us, to walk our road, to wear our shoes, to put on the flesh of our flesh, our worry and woe and delight. This scene reminds us that God knows us: God knows the weight of our grief. God knows the way uncertainties can twist us in a knot. God knows what the butterflies in our stomach feel like when we dare to step out on a new adventure. God knows what love—in all its forms—feels like.

God knows what it is to bleed.

And to laugh.

In baptism, in general, and in Jesus' baptism, in particular, God is saying something like, I am on your team. You are my kind of people. I will wash you and ready you for service. I will walk with you in the person of my son. You are marked to join me in my redemptive work. I'll help you use your gifts. I'll teach you to give your life away in generous service.

We remember our baptism not only to recall what God has done, but to give thanks for what God continues to do in this new day, this new year, this new life.

Alleluia.

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