

Epiphany 1A-20
 Baptism of the Lord Sunday
 Matthew 3: 13-17
 January 12, 2019
 Rev. Rob Carter

Christian Storytelling – Part 1:
 “Baptism – The Beginning of the Story”

I didn't want to become a pastor. I wanted to become a clinical psychologist. That's why I went to college as a psychology major. And I enjoyed it. So much so that I overachieved a bit and got a job as a counselor my senior year. But that counseling job proved to be more than I expected. Don't get me wrong—I enjoyed it—working with abused children and youth. But my time there formed me in such a way that, as I began to apply to graduate psychology programs, I also began to think seriously about becoming a specialized *pastoral* counselor.

So to make a long story short, as graduation approached, I decided to apply to seminary, in addition to psych graduate programs. Which wasn't easy. I'd spent my first three years of college running far and fast from the church.

So to put it mildly, the eventual decision to go to seminary—to give it a taste—it was tough. And uncomfortable.

For starter, I vividly remember thinking how laughable it was that I was deferring a graduate program in psychology to enter a program for a degree called Master of Divinity. I mean, is there a more ridiculous name for a degree in all the world? “Master of Divinity.” Who in the world can master things divine? Who in the world can master the word of God in the Old and New Testaments? Who can truly master what seminaries call “systematic theology,” an area of study all seminarians must engage. Heck, it took me an entire semester to muster up the courage to ask someone what the phrase “systematic theology” even meant.

It's just silly, isn't it? Master of Divinity.

But my biggest struggle that first year of seminary wasn't with the program name I was in. Nor was it the classwork, or the student body, or anything of the sort.

What kept me up most nights that first semester... was the feeling I didn't belong there. That I was so wildly out of place. “Why am I here?” I kept asking myself.

You see, I knew who I was. Just a regular guy who does regular things. I had just graduated college, where I'd been a member of a fraternity where we did all sorts of prototypical fraternity things.

So I *knew* I wasn't holier than anyone else. I *knew* God didn't love me the least bit more than God loved others. I *knew* I'd already made more than my fair share of mistakes, and I *knew* I'd undoubtedly make a whole lot more.

I knew who I was.

So I also knew I didn't have any kind of unique connection with the divine. And I knew my gifts, my spiritual gifts... I knew they weren't any better than, any stronger than, any more special than anyone else's. I was just... me, you know? Regular ol' Rob.

What the heck was I doing at a seminary?

I knew I was not, nor was I ever gonna be any sort of super religious preacher man.

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By the end of my first semester, a new friend could sense that internal struggle within me. One night we sat down and I opened up... explaining that I really didn't know what I was doing there. That I wasn't what I thought most people expected a seminarian to be. To which my dear friend simply replied, "Me too, Rob. Me too."

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It took me a little while, but eventually I figured it out. I realized I was right. I realized I wasn't then nor would I ever become any holier than anyone else. I wasn't more loved... I wasn't more gifted... and I never would be.

And I realized I would never need to be... nor should I ever pretend to be.

Because baptism has already made it clear. God loves each and all. God names and claims and blesses both you and me. Both us and them! So while I wasn't more loved, more gifted, or more prepared for this thing called discipleship than others... I realized that was the whole point.

At the font, God has made it plain and simple. You... me... us... them... those folks out there... we're *all* loved. God calls us *each* by name and blesses us with gifts and calls us to use them.

What is unique for you and me and those who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ is that, in baptism, we get to witness this claim. We get to celebrate this life-giving reality. So you and I... we get to live life *knowing* we are named, and claimed, and blessed to be a blessing.

It doesn't mean God doesn't love those who aren't baptized. Rather, it means that those who are baptized get to share this water-filled beginning to our faith journeys together, as we come to uncover the peace and trust of knowing nowhere we go and nothing we do can ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

That's baptism. It's the beginning to every disciple's faith story there ever was. Uncovering grace and love that changes the way we see ourselves and the world around us.

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And as we read in Matthew today, it's the exact same beginning to Jesus' journey, too! All four gospels say so. Before Jesus' ministry begins, he goes to see his cousin John, son of Zacchariah, to be baptized.

Initially, John thought the whole thing was ridiculous. "I can't baptize you, Jesus. You should be the one to baptize me." But Jesus insisted. He insisted because he knew he needed what we all need. He needed to see... he needed to hear... he needed to feel the deep down truth of who he was.

So John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River that day. And as he came up from the water, the sky cracked open and the Holy Spirit fluttered down landed on him, like a dove on his shoulder. Then a voice came from the heavens, “This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

There it was. Exactly what Jesus needed to see... and hear... and feel. The eternal proclamation of who he was. God’s Beloved. Claimed by God. Blessed to be a blessing.

It was only then that his story began. It was then that he set out on the road of mission and ministry, seeking to reveal the kingdom of God in the here and now.

And as Jesus taught his disciples, the same holds true for you and me and all who seek to live into the promise of baptism.

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So what I realized somewhere amid my first year of seminary is that, while seminary may be a special place, it wasn’t intended for special people. Rather... seminary... and now parish ministry... it’s all just *part* of my ongoing baptismal story. It’s simply part of how I’m choosing to live out the story that started when I began realizing what it means to be loved and named and claimed and blessed.

I also realized that, while our stories all begin the same—amid the love of God—no two stories are ever the same. Nor should they be. We all respond to God in our own ways, amid our own circumstances and life events along the way.

Which is why Christ gave us the Church. A community of disciples who share the same beginning to our individual stories, even as we seek to live them out in our own, beautifully unique ways. That’s really what discipleship is all about, isn’t it?

So how about you? What does your story entail? How is your life telling the story of your baptism?

Do you live amid the certainty that you’re loved?

Do you lived amid the assurance that you are blessed with gifts and are called to use them?

Do you live in pursuit of the kingdom of God on earth as it is heaven?

If so... what is your story telling? How is your story evolving? How are you living into the reality that you—very specifically—you are named and claimed by God, blessed to be a blessing?

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The point is, friends, baptism isn’t a one-time event that occurred in our past. Baptism stands as the very foundation from which a life of faith grows and moves and forms and spreads blessings.

And today... today we get to celebrate its promise. Or, perhaps better said, we get to celebrate what it means to remember we have been baptized... we get to live as those who know we are named and claimed and blessed to be a blessing.

So if you would, I would ask you to please take out your bulletins now, and turn to the Litany of Reaffirmation—the litany in which we reaffirm the promises of our baptism. Promises that we are all—each and all—loved by God enough to be named, and claimed, and blessed to be a blessing.