**RE:claim Who & Whose We Are**

Baptism of the Lord 1A-23

Matthew 3: 13-17

1.8.23

Prayer for Illumination

**Matthew 3: 13-17**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan,

to be baptized by him.

John would have prevented him, saying,

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

But Jesus answered him,

“Let it be so now;

for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized,

just as he came up from the water,

suddenly the heavens were opened to him

and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove

and alighting on him.

And a voice from heaven said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

RE:claim

*Who & Whose You Are*

While the lesson we just read is already three chapters into Matthew’s Gospel, make no mistake, Matthew is just now getting to the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

In fact, up until this point, Jesus hasn’t said a word that’s been recorded by Matthew.

Instead, his gospel begins rather uniquely—with a genealogy that tries to connect Jesus’s ancestry back to the great King David… and then again all the way back to Abraham and God’s first covenant with God’s people.

After drawing that line, Matthew then offers us a succinct incarnation story. He makes just a short note about Mary’s virginity… offers no story of a stable or manger or shepherds or cattle. He just cuts to the chase, proclaiming that an angel convinced Joseph to stay with Mary even though she was pregnant. And, in time, she bore God’s son, and they named him Jesus.

From there, Matthew is the only Gospel to share the Epiphany story explored last week, as foreign magi saw a star in the East they interpreted as a sign that the King of the Jews had been born. Matthew describes how the insecure Roman ruler Herod began to fear this infant king… and sought him out… even killing innocent young lives around Bethlehem in the process. But because an angel had warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt, Jesus was safe.

There, in Egypt, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus stayed until an angel told them it was safe to return to Israel.

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That’s where the second chapter ends—with infant or child Jesus having returned to Israel with his family.

Which is significant… because as chapter 3 begins, out of nowhere… Jesus is suddenly an adult… showing up at the Jordan River to be baptized by this prophet named John. And John can’t believe it.

You see, John had been calling everyone—everyone—to be baptized amid what he called a “baptism of repentance.” He was inviting folks to be baptized into a new way of seeing *themselves..*. even a new way of seeing life itself… not built on the ways of the world, but on the ways of God, who, John said, was sending a messenger to reveal the ways of God’s kingdom.

Well… specifically John said, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

So when Jesus actually showed up… ready and eager to be baptized… John wasn’t having it. “I need to be baptized by you, Jesus. Why do you come to me? You don’t need to be baptized”

And, depending on how you understand baptism, John had a point. If we think of baptism simply as a means of grace and forgiveness… if we look at baptism as much of the Church has—identifying it mostly as a means to salvation—John was right. Jesus didn’t need to be baptized, theologically speaking. He was sinless. He came to reveal the kingdom of God. So he didn’t need to repent and be baptized in order to suddenly see what he came to reveal.

But Jesus understood that baptism is much more than mere waters of forgiveness. He understood that baptism, much like the ancient Hebrew rite of circumcision, is more about identity than anything else. It’s a naming and claiming of who you are… and whose you are.

Which is why Jesus wasn’t leaving without being baptized.

So as all four gospels tell it, John baptized Jesus in the Jordan that day. And as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens open and the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

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It’s one of the most beautiful moments in all of Scripture. God the Father proclaiming that Jesus, the Son, is loved, and claimed, just as he is.

But it’s not just beautiful… it’s also profound.

Because we need to remember… Jesus hasn’t done a thing, yet. In fact, other than a 12-verse story Luke mentions of when a 12-year-old Jesus hung out in a temple for three days, we know absolutely nothing… not a single thing about child Jesus… or adolescent Jesus… or even young adult Jesus.

The Gospels simply don’t offer a history of who Jesus was or what he had done before this moment in time. None of them do.

And yet… before Jesus teaches one lesson… before he can heal even one person… before he ever speaks truth to the powers of Jerusalem or Rome… God is already making it clear. Jesus is loved… and claimed… and pleasing to God.

* Because God’s love isn’t dependent on what you do.
* Just as God’s love isn’t dependent on where you’ve been.
* God doesn’t define you by your worst mistakes.
* Just as God doesn’t measure you worth by how much you accomplish.

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Which… I think we should admit… while it sounds beautiful in lots of ways… it also challenges us. Even makes us uncomfortable. Particularly those of us who’ve been steeped amid our western, capitalistic, Protestant emphasis on the individual. I mean, we’ve all been raised in a society that preaches independence. We’re surrounded, everyday, with expectations to be or become own person. To be self-reliant. To understand and live out, exactly, who we are… *without any thought to whose we are.*

Which is why there are parts within all us that still want to measure ourselves—and others—by our accomplishments.

Just as there are times when we doubt we could possibly be truly… unconditionally loved… if others knew the worst of our shames or the depth of our brokenness.

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But as Jesus’ own baptism makes clear, the waters of baptism invite us to trust the promise that… **like it or not, you *are* loved, because God says you are worth being loved.**

Baptism proclaims that… **like it or not, you are blessed with grace, because God says you are worth redeeming.**

Just as baptism insists… God is not only with you… God’s Spirit and spiritual gifts dwell within you because God is determined not to be God without you.

**For at it’s heart… what baptism declares more than anything else… is that you belong to God.**

And if you don’t want to belong to God?

* Baptism says, “Too bad. You do, now and always.”

And if you want to spend your life running away from God, or pretending as if the love of God’s isn’t real or for you…

* Baptism says you can try, and you’ll miss out on appreciating just how loved you are… but nothing you do and nowhere you go can ever separate you from God’s love.

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This, dear friends, is why Jesus insisted on being baptized. Not because he needed forgiveness. But as he stepped through the threshold of his fledgling ministry… as his life was about to take him down new paths and new experiences that would form him and shape him in new and unexpected ways… he wanted… and needed… to see, and hear, and experience the promise of who and whose he would always be.

Just as we do. Just as we need to remember… though our lives evolve… and new experiences shape our own sense of self along the way… we need to remember what is promised amid this sacred sacrament. That regardless of what may happen around us or to us… no matter what we may say or do… regardless of how far we reach or how low we might fall… we are… now and always… God’s beloved. This is, dear friends, who and whose we are.

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*…LITANY….*

So we take time, this morning, to not only celebrate this sacrament of our Lord… but to remember and reclaim the promises of our baptisms. The promises that ring true not simply in moments at the font… but each and every day… amid each and every step we take as we traverse this life with a God who refuses to be God without us.

So I invite you, dear friends, to join in our Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant… as we reflect upon what it means to live as those claimed by God… loved by God… blessed by God now and always.

*Litany*…