

# Beloved By God

## Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22    Isaiah 43:1-7  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
January 9, 2022

January 6 (a day that will live in infamy, though I will *not* address that today!), is known on the liturgical church calendar as the “Epiphany of the Lord”. It’s the twelfth day of the season of Christmas. In my absence last Sunday, even though it was before the actual Day of Epiphany, the entire service, including a wonderful sermon by the Rev. Tim Blodgett, the General Presbyter of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, focused on the meaning of Epiphany. As always, the biblical text on Epiphany is the story of the magi following a star and recognizing the Presence of God in baby/child Jesus as they worshiped him and presented him with gifts.

We got a bit of a head start, therefore, into this new **liturgical season of Epiphany**, which lasts until Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the season of Lent. The Greek word **epiphany** literally means “manifestation” – an appearance or revelation. In the broadest sense of the term, an epiphany is an occasion when something either appears or is revealed to you. It is often described as **an illuminating discovery or realization**, especially one that comes unexpectedly. We often call these “Aha” moments. In a spiritual setting, an epiphany is often used to describe the revelation or experience of the Divine, the Sacred in our midst. And in a biblical context, an epiphany story includes those **occasions when the Presence of God is revealed in and through Jesus**.

From the perspective of the gospel writers, these stories are **meant to reveal a clearer understanding of Jesus’ identity**. The Sunday following the Day of Epiphany, like today, is always designated on the liturgical church calendar as **Baptism of the Lord Sunday**. It is also considered an epiphany story because after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. And a voice from heaven declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). This reveals that **the manifestation of God’s Presence is made known, and can be found in Jesus, thus helping to reveal his identity**. It was the gospel writer’s way of revealing: If you want to know what God is like, look at who Jesus is, hear what Jesus says, and pay attention to what Jesus does. That’s why, as Christians, we can declare that Jesus is the decisive revelation of the nature and character of God. And a progressive Christianity perspective would add: yet, not the only revelation or manifestation of the Divine. From a Celtic spirituality perspective, and to be honest the spirituality of most all indigenous communities of faith, God can and does reveal God’s Sacred Presence within us, within others, within nature, and all of creation itself.

In order to more fully understand the meaning of baptism, however, it’s helpful to explore the words from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. He writes in chapter 43, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine... you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you” (vv. 1b, 4a). The gospel writers used

this understanding of God's relationship with Israel and applied it to the understanding of Jesus' identity, and ultimately, to our own identity.

**In baptism, Jesus is set apart, called by a unique name: the beloved Son of God. With the name came a mission.** Again, the prophet speaks for the Divine, "I have called you by name, you are mine." Placed in this context, **all baptisms, yours and mine, are also a setting apart. Names have deep meaning, and baptism, at one level, is a naming ceremony.**

**Baptism is a personal calling, giving us both an identity as a beloved child of God, just as Jesus was, and a mission. It is our initiation into the family of God – into community! We are called to live our lives, therefore, as a reflection of our identity – of who we are and whose we are.**

We are to constantly remind ourselves that we belong to God, not just to the world. We are claimed by God as a beloved child, as a beloved community, and called by name to be set apart for a purpose. **That mission is to further the ways and teachings of Jesus in our efforts, by God's grace, to be part of the ushering in of the kingdom of God in the here and now. There is perhaps no greater gift than to hear God calling you by name,** however you understand the Divine. **Have you, do you hear it deep within your own being?** Sometimes that's hard to hear because there are so many other voices clamoring for attention and bombarding our minds and hearts. So we must listen!

It's also important to remember that **Jesus' baptism came at the very beginning of his public ministry.** Some see baptism as an end point, tying it strictly to their understanding of eternal salvation. Yet, **scripture reveals that it's just our starting point.** We should see Jesus' baptism, then, as more than an act of solidarity with broken humanity. "Rather, we should see it as a declaration of a revolutionary commitment to God's plan and to the well-being of God's people. It signals his willingness to be a part – the crucial part – of the new order God has pledged to enact and God begins to enact in Jesus' public ministry."<sup>1</sup>

If there is one major takeaway from this reflection of Jesus' baptism it is this. **"Because we are part of the Body of Christ, it's not just Jesus to whom God says, "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased" – these words are also address to us,"<sup>2</sup> to you and me.** How would that affect our attitudes and behaviors if we carried with us each and every day the understanding that everyone we meet is a beloved daughter or son of God?

Let me return, briefly, from the importance of understanding our identity as a beloved child of God to the mission to which we are called in and through our baptism. **Ismael Ruiz-Millán** is a United Methodist pastor and the director of the Hispanic House of Studies, Global Education & Intercultural Formation at Duke Divinity School. He writes:

Living our baptismal vows today might lead us to uncomfortable places, to let go of relationships, to establish new friendships with people we would never expect, to unlearn and redeem oppressive theological and political convictions, and to **resist and seek transformation of the current systems that perpetuate oppression and dehumanization.**

**Jesus' baptism is the reminder that our baptism is just the beginning, our joining of God's plan for all humanity to experience liberation. More than ever, the body of Christ on earth needs to rise, resist, and reclaim this world as God's world.** As

we intentionally seek to live out our baptismal covenant daily this new year, may we also remember that the Spirit that claimed Jesus as the beloved son is the same Spirit that claims us today as the beloved children of God.

This is what is meant when during the end of a service of baptism the pastor declares, "Remember your baptism." It's not about remembering the time and place of the actual baptism. After all, most of us were babies at the time, at least those of us who were in a Presbyterian church at the time. Or, as **Richard Rohr** posted a few years ago, "**We already and always have the divine image within us; but we hopefully grow into the divine likeness as we begin to externally resemble the goodness of God.**"

This is the our calling – our identity and our mission in and through our baptism. By God's grace, may it be so.

Amen.

Resources:

<sup>1</sup>Matthew L. Skinner, *Commentary on Baptism of the Lord, Connections*.

<sup>2</sup>"Jesus Also: SALT'S Lectionary Commentary for Jesus' Baptism," SALT, 2022.

Ismael Ruiz-Millán, "With us through the water," *The Christian Century*, 2022.