

Chosen and Beloved by God

Baptism of the Lord Sunday Ordination & Installation of Elders

Mark 1:4-11 Isaiah 43:1-3a Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Even though there are some particular traditional church teachings that I, and many of you, no longer cling to, I do continue to firmly believe that each of us has been called by God, by name; called to recognize that we are part of the family of God; called for service in furthering the kingdom of God in our midst. Today's scripture lessons have much insight to share with us concerning this.

In the very first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, we are introduced to an adult Jesus (who was probably around 30 years old). We're told, "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." So here, in only the ninth verse in the Gospel in Mark, Jesus is being baptized. What Mark never fully explains, however, is *why* Jesus came to John in the first place to be baptized. We will never be able to fully answer that question. But we do have an understanding of its importance.

At one level, from a functional standpoint, **Jesus' baptism served somewhat the same purpose as an ordination and installation service.** This is why I say that. As Presbyterians, we view the act of **ordination** (whether it be to the office of teaching elder (pastor), or ruling elder, or deacon) as the public acknowledgment that through the nominating process and vote of the congregation, that a person has been called by God for a specific duty and function in the church. Further, we believe that God will empower those who are ordained with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in order to help them fulfill their duties and responsibilities in leading and guiding the congregation.

So what does all this have to do with Jesus and his baptism? Just like ordination and installation of church officers, **the public acknowledgment of being called into God's service is indeed part of the meaning of Jesus' baptism.** Jesus' baptism served as an acceptance of not only his place in the family of God, but also of his vocation of spreading the good news of the kingdom of God. We, in turn, through our baptism, come to understand that we have a similar **vocation of living out and spreading the good news of God's inclusive realm.** We call that, in the best sense of the word, **evangelism.** During our annual Session Retreat yesterday, we talked about making that a priority in our ministry efforts this year.

This story of Jesus' baptism, then, can teach us what happens to us in our own baptism. In verse 10 of chapter 1, Mark tells us that just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **Like Jesus, in and through our baptism we are also promised the presence of the Holy Spirit upon and within us.**

Next, Mark writes, “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” Here’s the important part for you and I to consider. If Jesus’ baptism serves as a model for our own baptism, which we as Presbyterians believe it does, then do these same words of God apply to each one of us? **Is God telling you and me personally, ‘You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well pleased’? I truly believe with my whole heart and mind that each one of us is indeed not only a child of God, but a beloved child of God – just as Jesus was.**

Do you believe that as well? If so, what difference can that make in your life? At a very deep and basic level, that means that you and I have an important place in the family of God. And because of that, nobody can tell you that your life doesn’t matter. Nobody can tell you that you are unloved. Nobody can tell you that you don’t belong. Turn to your neighbor right now and declare, “Nobody!”

In the eyes of God, your life does matter, you are loved, and you do belong! Sometimes, however, we listen instead to that voice of rejection that comes from the world around us. And sometimes that voice of rejection comes from within ourselves. It is at times like these that we especially need to listen instead to God’s voice. The renowned Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, wrote an incredible book in 1995 entitled, *Life of the Beloved*. In it he writes:

Yes, there is that voice, the voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly: ‘You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.’

It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: ‘You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, [you are an abomination,] you are nobody — unless you can demonstrate the opposite.’

These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That’s the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection. Over the years, I have come to realize that **the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection...**

As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone or abandoned, I find myself thinking: ‘Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.’ Instead of taking a critical look at the circumstances or trying to understand my own and others’ limitations, **I tend to blame myself — not just for what I did, but for who I am.** My dark side says: ‘I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected and abandoned.’

Let me ask you in all seriousness this morning, can you relate in some way to these words and feelings? I wouldn’t be surprised if we all can at some level. **But an empowering truth still remains. God is saying to you right now, as God did to Jesus, “You are my child, the beloved, and with you I am well pleased.”**

I encourage you this morning, even challenge you, to **listen for that voice deep within you that calls you “the beloved.”** This, I believe, is the promise of our own baptism, just as it was true in Jesus’ baptism. And we can help each other in this regard,

right here in this congregation, by reminding each other of this truth. For it is also true that when we are aware of our own chosenness, our eyes are open to the chosenness of others.

There is a unique, special place for everyone in the family of God, for it is indeed an inclusive place. So during this coming week and throughout this new year, be attentive to the ways that God is calling you by name and blessing you. Be intentional, as well, to be a blessing to others. In this way we may all come to a deeper understanding of our own calling and baptism, knowing that it is meant to make us aware of our *identity* as beloved children of God!

And may we continue to strive to be a community of faith that reaches out to the larger community beyond ourselves with the message, "Here at College Hill, you have a place where you can belong."

Amen.