

My Beloved Child
Matthew 3:13-17
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We've talked a lot lately about a backwards God – God who does things backwards, upside down, inside out. Choosing weakness over strength, using barren, virgin and ancient wombs to begin a nation, and birth prophets and then deliver the Messiah of all, Coming in poverty instead of prominence, Hanging out with shady outcasts instead of reputable leaders, Dying instead of Ruling, and then when the story is good and over, coming back to life.

Today we celebrate the sacrament of baptism. This is one of the defining marks of our faith, and another backwards event. There is nothing magic about baptism. Pouring water and speaking words doesn't save us or change us. We come here as people who doubt and argue, who suffer pain and fear, who betray and let down those who love us. And we leave the same way. But we baptize anyway, and we celebrate it. Why?

Because God calls us by grace to come, and as we obey. In the mystery of this moment, God claims us and marks us as Christ's own forever. Our journey to discover what this means in our life, how we are meant to share in God's plans for the world, begins here. The Spirit indwells us and beckons us to follow. It is not about our attitude, our earning anything, the words said or water used, it is about God.

The event that begins our life of faith is not about what we believe or what we do, rather we are made free to believe and to do because of God's grace claiming us as God's own. It's quite remarkable, really. That God would do such a thing. That wholly without our ability to say yes or no, God says yes to us. That before we can say, Ok, I will follow, I will worship you, I will be a good boy, a good girl, a good Christian, God says, You're mine. Period. From here on out. You belong to me, no matter what. And guess what else? I've got big plans for you!

Frankly, it seems to me that there's no leverage in this arrangement at all. Who would hand their employees their paychecks at the beginning of the week and invite them to come to work and do their jobs over the next 5 days? Or give out stellar report cards and then tell the students to do their best over the semester? Everybody knows that kids aren't going to eat the vegetables if the dessert is the first thing served. This backwards God seems to get it wrong. What's to keep us from wandering off? Denying or betraying God? Doesn't God want to test it out a little, before making such a radical claim? Doesn't God want to be sure we are people God wants to be identified with before calling us God's own? What is God up to?

Today we heard of Jesus' baptism. The gospels describe Jesus' baptism in an almost blink and you'll miss it kind of way. Jesus shuffles into the river with all the others and is baptized right alongside the rest of them. A peasant man, son of a carpenter from a small,

no-place town. Just like the rest of them, in one way or another. Nobody around him gave him a glance, or wondered to themselves, hmmm, could that guy be the Messiah? No, rather they were all gazing at John, all passion and fire, prophecy and drama, and speculating that perhaps HE was the chosen one. John who preached fire and passion like a prophet of old and lived off the grid.

But the Messiah wanders into the waters of salvation right amongst them, just as he slipped into the earth in the form of a tiny helpless child, unobtrusively, almost not worth mentioning, save to a few rag tag shepherd on a hillside that nobody notices anyway, or a group of strangers from a far off land. The scriptures for the most part jump suddenly from Jesus' infancy and the miracle of his birth, to his adulthood and this moment, his baptism. Standing in the mucky river with the converts lined up, John raises his head and meets eyes with his cousin, the Chosen One, and he balks. I can't baptize you! He says, you should be baptizing me! This is all wrong, it's all backwards! But Jesus insists and a baffled John goes ahead and baptizes Jesus just like everybody else.

After Jesus is baptized, after we have good and established that the God of the universe came into existence just like one of us, and grew up indistinguishable from you or me, a common regular human being, something dramatic occurs. This wet and dripping man, the Galilean from Nazareth, born in a stable and raised in a carpenter's shop, slogs out of the river back onto the muddy shore. And then the heavens open up, and the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove, deliberately soaring from the torn sky and landing on this man. And a voice announces to all the startled onlookers, "This is My beloved Child, I am delighted in him!"

And so kicks off Jesus' ministry. In front of all those folks and in the shadow of the dynamic one sent to pave the way, Jesus is revealed and his ministry is inaugurated. God's claim on him, God's naming of Jesus, is the beginning for Jesus to fulfill God's calling and ministry to the world. He goes from that place as God's beloved child, sent by God and with the power of the Holy Spirit guiding him. But as another telltale move of the backwards God, the way that Jesus' ministry begins is not in might and power, not in declaring that he comes in the authority of the God of all creation. His ministry on earth begins in coming just as one of us, with us, bearing the weight of human repentance, the need for God's mercy, the hope of God's grace and leading.

God has come to share our place. We are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. Martin Luther calls this "the happy exchange." That in Jesus, God takes on everything it means to be human, and in exchange gives us everything it means to be Christ. So being in relationship with God, being free to love God and one another, being empowered to share in God's work of healing and hope, this is our's in the trade. And in exchange, our weak and selfish humanity, death in all its ugly forms: injustice, atrophy, corporate evil and personal pain, all that we do to ourselves and each other, all that separates us from God and threatens to destroy us, Jesus takes this into himself.

We have a picture on Owen's bedroom wall. It is framed, with a date on the bottom, March 6, 2005. In the picture a short, stout cheerful looking woman in a robe holds a small boy in

white in the crook of one arm, his perfectly round head front and center and his face hidden from the camera. She is saying something, and her other hand is cupped, above him, water dripping down from the backs of her fingers. Owen's baptism. We placed the picture directly across from his bed.

Owen struggled for a while with terrible nightmares. Frightening visions that made him feel unsafe, alone, terrified to be in his room at night. We tried to comfort him in various ways, praying for him, cuddling him, leaving the door open and the hall light on. We told him that Jesus was with him, and this just frustrated him. "I can't see Jesus!" We told him angels were there and that just freaked him out. "I don't want them in here!" Finally, we told him the story of his baptism. "You belong to God, we said; You've been baptized. Jesus' love is stronger than death, it broke death, forever. When you feel afraid, look at this picture. This is your baptism. Do you know what this means?" we asked. And then he first heard the mantra that has become Owen's comfort in fear: "Death can't get me because Jesus has got me."

And in years to come, when Owen doubts himself and his parents and questions the things he has been raised to believe, when life knocks him down and breaks his heart, that picture on his bedroom wall is testimony that no matter how far he goes, no matter how lost he feels, no matter how hard he fights it, no matter how loudly he may shout "NO!" God has already said yes. It is irreversible and permanent. He belongs to God.

God has claimed the whole world and the promises of God are for all. All creation and every person who walks the planet belongs to God. But we sit here as a people with that promise poured over us, and spoken to us - many of us before we could speak, embraced into us by those around us. When you and I were baptized, belonging to God became what defines us; our identity is now rooted in that reality. Being a Christian doesn't take away the questions or spare us the pain. It doesn't exempt us from hardship or shield us from evil. Being a Christian means that no matter what happens we have this hope and promise: we belong to God. Death can't get us because Jesus has got us.

And just as it was for Jesus, our baptism is the beginning of our ministry. God chooses us to participate - we are drawn into God's purposes, sent out in God's name. And we live out our faith by entering in, not backing away from other's pain or suffering, not fearing our own doubts or failures, but even in our very weakness speaking up, reaching out, stepping in. Because, as Paul says, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

May we bravely live out our identity and calling. As a people claimed by the God-with-us, and led by the Holy Spirit, may we fearlessly embrace a world being redeemed by God; and may we continually seek to join in the miracle of redemption - in all the prominent and quiet ways God is accomplishing it - until Christ returns.
Amen.