

Baptismal Identity: You Are My Beloved

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 3, starting in verse 1.

In those days, John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah. A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. John's clothes were made of camel's hair and he had a leather belt around his waist.

His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

[1 : 1 7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them, You brood of vipers. You brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the coming wrath.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. I tell you that out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham.

The axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance.

But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him saying, I need to be baptized by you.

[2 : 2 8] And do you come to me? Jesus replied, let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness. Then John consented.

And as soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment, heaven was opened. 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 whom I love. With him I am well pleased. This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ. Amen. You may be seated. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, Happy New Year, Christ Church. You all look well rested this morning.

And it's a joy to start this new year in worship together, just praising God and thanking him for all of his goodness to us over the past year and anticipating the goodness he'll show to us in this next year.

[3 : 28] So what does one preach on New Year's Day? What does one preach here on the eighth day of the 12 days of Christmas?

At Christmas, we've been celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, but Jesus grew up. I don't know if that's a spoiler alert to any of you, but Jesus didn't stay a baby.

He grew up. He became a man. He went into public ministry, and when he did so, he turned the world upside down. And the gospel of Matthew puts us in touch with that reality.

It puts us in touch with the historical Jesus of Nazareth, who is the revelation of God. And Matthew 3 is the place where Jesus' public ministry begins, here on the edge of the waters of the Jordan River.

And what I think this text tells us today is that real life flows from the Son's baptism and the Father's love and the Spirit's power.

[4 : 35] And I think we can see all of those things here in this text, that real life flows from the Son's baptism and the Father's love and the Spirit's power. And I want to talk a little bit about, first of all, about the Son's baptism.

It says in verse 1, that in those days John the Baptist came and he was preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and he was saying, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

We all know Paul Revere, you know, the British are coming, the British are coming. John the Baptist says the kingdom of God is coming. The kingdom of heaven is coming. And his role is to alarm us, to alarm us into serious preparation.

And where is he doing that? He's doing that at the very place where the liberated people of God entered into the promised land. They came into the promised land at the Jordan River. And so John goes back to that place and he says, let's begin again.

Let's have a fresh start at these waters and get ready for the liberating rule of God, the gracious reign of God that's just around the corner.

[5 : 45] It's an announcement that it's coming. And how do the people respond? Well, it says in verse 5 that people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan and they were confessing their sins and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River.

They weren't minimizing their sins. They weren't denying their sins. They weren't justifying their sins. They were coming and openly admitting their destructive self-centeredness that, yeah, you know, we are not the people we should be.

We've not been loving God with all of our heart. We've not been loving our neighbors as much as or more than we love ourselves. We've been missing the high mark for which God made us, the mark of love.

We've been falling way short of that mark. And therefore, we need to be washed by the mercies of God. We need to be cleansed by the grace of God.

And John continues with his preaching in verse 7 and says that when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them, you brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the coming wrath.

[7 : 01] Now, John's kind of a blunt guy. He's a little bit rude. And, you know, he says to the pastors and the priests who come out, he says, you know, your spiritual and moral condition is pretty desperate.

You're far worse than you imagine yourselves to be. You too, theologians and Bible scholars, need to turn around.

You need to change your mind. You need to repent. And gratefully, you know, John shifts away from this very uncomfortable diagnosis of our condition to a very comforting treatment of that condition.

In verse 11, when he starts to say, I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

Now, every Christian needs this kind of humility toward this king who's bringing the kingdom of heaven. An Israelite in these days, he would never ask his slave to take off his shoes when he came home from work because that would just be too degrading.

[8 : 14] You know, a person should take their own shoes off. But John the Baptist says, you know, Lord, I'm willing to do for you what a slave would not even be asked to do.

And yet I recognize that I'm not even worthy to do that which a slave would never be asked to do. And that's the proper and fitting attitude toward this king who's coming and bringing the kingdom of heaven.

He says one's coming and he's powerful and you're not even worthy to, you know, bend down on the ground he walks on. But what does he say in verse 11?

He says he is going to come and he's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And every pastor needs, you know, the humility to know that what we can and what we cannot do.

And John basically says, look, I can put water on you, but only the king can come and give you the real thing. Only he can come and bring you what this water signifies.

[9 : 18] Only this king can come and immerse you and plunge you into the very presence and power of the living God. That only this one who's coming can cleanse you with the water and purify you with the power and the fire of the Holy Spirit.

And John is asking all the people that have gathered in his little congregation there at the Jordan River, are you ready? Are you prepared for this king who's coming?

Now notice what he says in verse 12 as he gets toward the end of his sermon. John says, his winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

And you're like, man, that's intense. That's extreme, kind of uncomfortable language. But if you read the gospel, Jesus uses equally strong language and he's continually pressing this question upon the people.

He's saying, are you wheat or are you chaff? Right? And wheat is something that has life in it. Right?

[10 : 28] Chaff does not. Chaff is this lifeless shell. It's this empty husk. But someone who's wheat is somebody who's received the life of God in themselves.

They've received life from above, the life of heaven. And Jesus is saying, I want to gather up all the wheat and I want to take that wheat and I want to turn it into bread and I want to form a community of wheat and bread that I can use to feed the whole world.

Are you ready to be that for this coming king, John says? But see, what happens next is quite shocking because it subverts all the expectations that John's been building up in our minds about what this coming king of fire is going to do.

It says in verse 13 that when Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan, he came to be baptized by John. Now, wait a minute. I thought that Jesus was going to come and do the baptizing.

I thought he was going to come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. I thought when he showed up, he was going to have a winnowing fork in his hand. And then he was going to gather up all the chaff, which is all of us, basically, and burn us up in unquenchable fire.

[11 : 49] But that's not what's happening here. Jesus comes and he stands in humility before John the Baptist. And he seems to be sharing in the penitential mood of all the people.

And he seems to be asking for the waters of baptism that would wash away the stain and the pollution of sin. What in the world is Jesus doing?

He's coming and he's identifying himself not with the God who comes in wrath. Not with the God who brings just judgment on this world. Rather, he's identifying himself with the people who are facing God's judgment and who need to repent.

Now, that's not how I would have done it. If I were becoming the king of this great kingdom of heaven, I would not choose to launch my campaign here in this river full of sinners.

I think I would want to protect my image a little more, brand myself a little better as more competent, surround myself with more successful people.

[13 : 03] But, you know, listen to what John says in verse 14. John tried to deter him, saying, I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me? And Jesus replied, John knows, he says, You don't need this baptism like all of us need this baptism.

But Jesus says, You know, you're right. I've come to live a righteous life. I've come to do it differently than everybody else here.

I've come to carry out God's will in every particular. I've come to be morally perfect. I've come to completely obey God. But I've not just come to do that.

I've come to get down low where all of you people are. I've come to get down into the water with you. I've come to take the place of sinners.

I'm here in my baptism to identify with you. I've come to be you. I've come to serve as your substitute. And I've come to represent all of you in these waters.

[14 : 16] And what's amazing to me is that if you read on to the very end of Matthew's gospel, his ministry ends just like it begins. It begins here in a river full of sinners and failures.

And then it ends on this cross between two sinners and before a bunch of sinners. And why did Jesus do this? Why did he come to live this way? Well, his baptism is a foreshadowing of his cross.

He's basically saying in this moment that I've come to be judged as the chaff so that you all can be gathered up as the wheat.

That I've come to be burned up in the fire of God's judgment so that you all could be blessed with the spirit of the living God. I've come to die your death so that you could live in union with God.

I've come to be sin for you so that you can have my righteousness. You can have the very righteousness of God. Martin Luther, when he was reflecting on this text in the 16th century, he said this.

[15 : 28] He said, Christ wanted to say, Although I am not myself a sinner, yet nevertheless I now bring with me the sin of the whole world, so that I am now only a sinner and the greatest sinner of the whole world.

For he was not washed and cleansed for his own sins since he had none, but from my sins and from the sins of the whole world.

And when I believe that, Luther says, I am freed from my sins and I don't know of any more sin. So friends, as we begin this new year, do you believe that Jesus was baptized, that he was washed and that he was cleansed for your sins?

That when he went down into those waters, he went down into the Jordan River, carrying you with him. And that when he came up out of those waters, he was bearing you up as a new creature, washed and reconciled with God.

And if you're here and you're exploring the Christian faith, you've not been baptized, are you ready to come and share in this great baptism of Jesus Christ?

[16 : 46] Are you ready to receive the grace that's displayed here at the Jordan River and that's waiting for you personally? I can think of no better way to begin a new year than to look at this righteousness of Christ and to step into that as your very own that's on offer for you here in this river full of sinners, just like you and just like me.

Matthew's telling us that real life flows from the son's baptism. It's no mistake that this is where he began his ministry because this is what his ministry is going to be all about.

But real life flows not only from the son's baptism, it also flows from the father's love. Real life flows to us from the father's love. If you think back to the Old Testament and you go back to Israel's baptism where God the father brings his people out of their bondage in Egypt and remember he takes them through the waters of the Red Sea, their baptism in the waters of the Red Sea, and he takes them out to freedom at Mount Sinai.

And there at that place in Exodus 19, he says to Israel, he says, you are my favored son. You are my treasured possession. You are the jewel in my crown.

I love you. I'm pleased with you. I delight in you. Right? But that was kind of the high point of Israel's story. From there on out, like things just went down and down and down.

[18 : 18] Things deteriorated. Israel never really lived up to her high status as the treasured possession of God. And yet here in the fullness of time is Jesus standing in the place of Israel, acting as a substitute for the people of God.

And when he comes up out of the water, what does he hear? It says in verse 16, as soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. And at that moment, heaven was opened, 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 whom I love. With him I am well pleased. See, the father cherishes his son.

The father adores his son. The father pours out his blessing upon his son. And though the people of God that are surrounding Jesus in this river, that though they've failed, though there's a river full of sin-sick people, God points to one of them.

Out of all of them, he says, you are my favored son. You are my treasured possession. You are the jewel in my crown. I love you. I'm pleased with you.

[19 : 30] I delight in you. We all know that the most important thing that any son or any daughter needs to know is the love of their father and the love of their mother.

Amen? But this is not just a word that's spoken to Jesus and for Jesus. It's really God the Father's word spoken to us and for us.

Because he doesn't say, you are my son whom I love. He says, this is my son whom I love. It's God the Father giving a public declaration, a word to all humanity, a word to all humanity, basically saying, dear world, here in Jesus, my son, is everything I want to say and reveal and do, is everything I want for people to hear and see and believe.

if you want to know anything about me, if you want to know anything from me, if you want to please me, then get together with my son.

You see, God the Father looks on the person of his son, he looks on the work of his son, and he basically says to us, isn't he lovely?

[20 : 44] Isn't he so pleasing? Isn't he just absolutely delightful? And it's so important for us to begin a new year meditating on this because the way God the Father is talking about his son, Jesus, is an indicator of how he feels about us.

If you are a Christian, if you've been united with Christ, if your life is hidden in Christ, then the Father says to you, you are my daughter, whom I love, and with you I am well pleased.

You are my beloved son. On you my favor rests. I don't merely pity you, or tolerate you, or put up with you.

I treasure you, and I cherish you. I delight in you, and I desire to be with you. I welcome you, and I want more of you. I not only love you, I like you.

I like you. Friends, do you know that? Are you beginning this new year hearing these words of blessing from your Father in heaven?

[22 : 03] Do you realize realize that of all the identities the world is trying to give you, this is who you really are? If we began this year, if we began our weeks, if we began every morning of every day just hearing this voice of love that's speaking to us from all eternity to all eternity, I believe more and more we would come to live out the life of the beloved son, Jesus Christ.

For this is our first spiritual task, is to claim and to live the life as the beloved of God. And that's not an easy task.

Right? It's a real struggle to claim the truth of who we really are in this world. Right? Who am I? That's the question that follows us all the days of our life.

Do we take our final breath? Who am I? It's the question that people are spending tons of money and energy trying to find the answer to that question. Who am I?

And the world is trying to give us the answer to that question. Right? The world says, well, it's easy. I am what I do. I am what I do. And when I do good things and I have success in life and I feel good about myself, but of course when I fail, I get low and I get depressed.

[23 : 30] And when I grow older and I can't do as many things as I used to do and I just can kind of sit there and look at all my trophies and the things I accomplished and the children I raised and kind of wonder to myself, I don't know, did I do something good?

The world says, I am what I do. And the world also says, well, I am what others people say about me. And that's great. If people are speaking well about me, then I can sort of walk around freely.

But a person says something negative about me and I start feeling kind of bad. And one person, a thousand people can praise me, one person criticizes me and what I start spiraling down and down and down.

The world says, I am what I do. I am what people say about me. The world says, I am what I have. And that's all well and good. I might have kind parents and a solid education and good health and enough in my bank account.

But what about when my parent dies? What about when my memory starts to fade? And, you know, my health starts to go and I lose the resources that I have.

[24 : 39] Who am I then when I don't have anything anymore? And this is the spiritual struggle. Because every one of us has to face the challenge every day of saying, I am not what I do.

And I am not what other people say about me. And I am not what I have. Rather, in union with Jesus Christ, I am the beloved of God the Father.

And on me, because of Christ, his favor is resting. Friends, do you believe that that's who you really are?

What if we did? What if we knew that in our bones? What if we got that into the core of our being? What if in 2023 we could so hear and believe and get this into the code of our DNA as our core truth and our centering reality that we have the blessing of God the Father, that we are the beloved of God the Father?

That blessing has the power to heal all of our wounds and our tragedies and our sorrows. It has the power to change the taproot of so many of our pathologies.

[25 : 58] It has the power to silence our voices of performance from the outside and our inner critics on the inside. It has the power to change the way we approach singleness and marriage, the way we approach our work.

We're not going out looking to other people to get the blessing and the acceptance and the love because we already have it. It changes the way we're a church. We don't come in here looking to get the blessing because we already know we have it.

We come looking to give the blessing that we have from our Heavenly Father. Is this making sense? Real life flows from the Son's baptism and from the Father's love and finally it flows from the Spirit's power.

And I'll close with this. It says in verse 16 that at that moment heaven was open and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him.

When we are baptized, we have that same heaven-sent, dove-like Holy Spirit descend upon us.

[27 : 11] And by the power of the Spirit that came upon Jesus, He could then go out in the rest of His life and the rest of His ministry saying, I know who I am. I can hear my Father's voice that you are the beloved Son and with you I'm well pleased.

That is who I am. And Jesus heard that voice and He clung to those words for the rest of His life. And that was so critical because what was happening? People were praising Jesus in one minute and they were rejecting Him the next minute.

They were saying Hosanna on Palm Sunday and they were saying crucify Him on Good Friday. But you see, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit that came on Him, He held on to the truth even in the darkness, even in the loneliness that I am the beloved of God.

even as the world is praising me or spitting on me, I am the beloved of God. And you see, the Spirit-empowered life, it's a life of listening.

Right? Jesus began every day by the power of the Holy Spirit listening to God. He started every day in prayer and He would go and by the Holy Spirit He would listen to the Father's word.

[28 : 29] He would listen out for the Father's wisdom and the Father's will and the Father's ways. And if you've ever tried to start your day like that, you know it requires some discipline.

It requires some effort to keep open and empty space and say, I'm not gonna check this and I'm not gonna go there. I'm gonna wait in this place and I'm just gonna listen out for the voice of God speaking to me by the Holy Spirit to tell me who I truly am.

And I just wanna invite you in these first mornings of 2023 to begin your day the way that Jesus began His day listening by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But the Spirit-empowered life is not only one of listening, it's also one of serving. Right? John said, this person is gonna come whose sandals I am not even worthy to carry.

Again, that's an ancient Near Eastern way of saying I'm not worthy to kiss the ground that He walks on. I'm not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under His table because He's the King.

[29 : 37] Right? I'm just the little subject. He's the Master and I'm the servant. He's the sovereign and I'm here to do His bidding. And that, I think, is the attitude of people who've received the Holy Spirit.

They begin their day and they say, you know, I'm not my own but I've been bought with a price. So Lord, would You give me the great privilege and the great responsibility of carrying Your sandals today?

I mean, I know I'm not worthy to even be Your slave but how can I serve You today? How can I serve Your people? How can I build up Your church? How can I carry out Your purposes?

You know that somebody has the Holy Spirit of God coming down upon them when they have this sort of mentality that I'm not even worthy to carry Your sandals but I want to.

And finally, the Spirit-empowered life is not just one of listening to God. It's not just one of serving as a slave of Christ but finally, it's one of gathering. Right?

[30 : 44] John says of Jesus, His winnowing fork is in His hand and He will clear His threshing floor gathering His wheat into the barn. And that's, if that's Jesus' mission is to gather more and more people into the barn, more and more people into the Father's kingdom so that they can know this earth-shattering, life-changing good news that we've been talking about today, then the question for us is who are we gathering?

Who's the one person that God's put in your life that needs to hear and know and experience these deep truths of God? My prayer and my hope in 2023 is that Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would be gathering more and more and more people into the Father's kingdom and that He would gather people through us, right, through our presence, through our love, through our invitations, through our humble and bold witness to the great baptism of the Son, the great love of the Father, and the great power of the Holy Spirit.

May it be so among us. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen.