

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22
Year C

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St. Peter's Glenside
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BE LOVED, BELOVED

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Today is not meant to be Epiphany, the sequel, but it may feel that way to some. When a Feast Day falls mid-week, churches can pick the Sunday on which to celebrate it which we did last week with the Wise Men following the star. So don't be confused if you realize other churches are celebrating Epiphany today with the baptism of Jesus which is certainly a marquis event in Christianity.

And yet: "The Christian church has never been comfortable with the baptism of Jesus," writes Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor. Say what? It's a jarring sentence.

The tricky part for the church apparently is that on the banks of the river waiting to be baptized were crowds of sinners. "Faulty, sorry, guilty human beings" - writes Taylor, "who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around...if Jesus would have listened to his public relations people he would have been a friend to sinners, a kind and loving helper, but *never* been mistaken of one of them. His handlers would never have allowed him to be baptized."

But that's not what happened. Jesus went into the muddy river with the crowds who wanted to be cleansed of their sins. He was one with the sinners. What kind of Messiah is this? Why get into a dirty river if you have no sins to repent? Wasn't he supposed to be perfect? So, what was he hiding?

This is why the baptism story was an embarrassment for the early church writes Christian historian John Dominic Crossan. It seemed off message. And that madman, John? The crazy street preacher eating locusts and all. Why was he baptizing Jesus?

Barbara Brown Taylor points out, rightly I think that "We spend a lot of time in the Christian church talking about God's love for sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them. ...Only Jesus, our leader and our Lord - did not seem too concerned about that. In him, God's being with us included God's being in the river with us in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of our own life with us."

Because if Jesus is in the river with us, one with us in the flesh and the flow of the water, we, too, are Beloved. Like Jesus, we are named and claimed by God. And why did Jesus even need to be baptized? Maybe the point is the he knew we surely did.

If Jesus is one with us, in the great flow of life, then when the clouds part, and the Holy Spirit descends as a dove and the voice says, “You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased,” we need to skip the theatrics and unreality of that moment and hold onto the word “Beloved.” Or “Be Loved.”

The wonder is that God names and claims us right from the start before we do anything to deserve it. He didn’t wait to see if Jesus did him proud...if the miracles turned out okay...if the Sermon on the Mount came together, or if that ragtag band of disciples could cut it. He loved and believed in him full stop. And that’s how we are loved. Yes, you and me we are all beloved. Our work is to let ourselves BE LOVED.

But we make it such an obstacle course! We spend – perhaps waste—a good portion of our lives wondering if we’re worthy of love. Capsized by our failings, our sins, our shame. But friends, that’s on us. Part of the idiocy of New Year’s resolutions is that we stack up all the reasons we’re not good enough, make unrealistic expectations about change and then, when we fail at keeping resolutions find we have more reasons not to Be Loved as God’s Beloved.

That’s it. You’re in. Loved, completely for who you are. We baptize babies, and will do so right after this service in a Covid-cautious baptism. Cassandra Joan High, Debbie Panebianco’s granddaughter.

She is loved, beloved. We don’t wait to see if we like how she turns out. We don’t wait to see who she loves, who she marries. Our love for her, God’s love for her, is pure and unconditional. You are Beloved.

We are the ones who create divisions and judgments about who’s in and who’s out. When you do that, as it’s been said, remember where you’re putting Jesus.

A few days after 9/11, a priest I knew from a fancy Episcopal Church on Fifth Avenue in New York City, wanted to see for himself. So when his day ended, he walked out of his church, wearing his collar, in a nice suit, with good shoes. He took the subway down to the smoking devastation of the World Trade Center. His collar got him through the police lines.

He wound up on “the pile” of devastating wreckage helping rescue workers who were picking up an arm here, a leg there, a few fingers, a clump of flesh; body parts were being thrown into a bucket which he was asked to bless.

The priest said as he looked at the human slop in the large bucket he knew in a way he never had before that “We are all the same. We’re one.” Everything else seemed beside the point.

That’s why Jesus got in the river. He was a Messiah, but unlike any that had ever come before. Unlike the everyone thought they wanted. Jesus was always radically different. We made him the King, the Prince of Peace, but Jesus embraced the “Mess” in Mess-iah, the human mess, and has been right in the bucket, in the river, with us since the beginning.

Don’t make it hard for yourself. You are God’s beloved, so let yourself BE LOVED.

We embrace a faith that is utterly preposterous. Rachel Held Evans, a terrific and thoughtful writer who died suddenly in her 30s, a few years ago said it better than anyone I know in *Searching for Sunday* and I quote:

In the ritual of baptism, our ancestors acted out the bizarre truth of the Christian identity: We are people who stand totally exposed before evil and death and declare them powerless against love.

Claim your power. BE LOVED, knowing that you are Christ's beloved. AMEN