

# Sermons at Oak Grove

*January 13, 2008*

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*Matthew 3:13-17*

*To Illuminate God's Name"*

*By Andries J Coetzee*

## **Scripture Readings: Matthew 3:13-17**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him 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, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

## **Sermon: "To Illuminate God's Name"**

The service of ordination and installation of elders and deacons is always a highlight and spiritually enriching for me. I just love it when we ask all ordained elders to come forward for the laying on of hands, and more than half of the Congregation comes forward, practicing one of the duties of their office, that is the ordination and installation of elders and deacons.

The reality is that each ordained elder and deacon has traveled their own journey to this point of taking up the yoke of the ministry of reconciliation. I myself remember a very confused and frustrated first year Liberal Arts Student with Theology as a major. I struggled to fit into the Dutch Reformed theology crowd, combined with the academic challenges of passing Biblical Hebrew and Greek, I was ready to throw in the towel after just six months of theological studies.

In the midst of my dilemma I decided to seek help and made an appointment with the campus counselor. He helped me to understand that God called me to ministry, to be myself with all my vulnerabilities and failures, my strengths, passions and hopes. God did not call me to be someone else, or to please the expectations created by the culture

of the day. What a freedom that was to grasp something of God's grace and acceptance, knowing that I was treasured and called by God for who I was and who God intended me to be.

This all inclusiveness of God is true for all of us, and that is what I see as we are presented today with a new slate of elders and deacons. Each one of them has traveled their own journey to accept this yoke of ministry today. There are those who can testify to God's power to turn a situation of tragedy, loss, and grief into a new life filled with love and a ministry of hope and care. There are those whom God brought to the Twin Cities area and lead to Oak Grove to minister among us, bringing new ideas, energy, and compassion. There are also those who have been here among us for quite a number of years and are willing to bring their experience to meet the challenges and the possibilities of our ministry together. It is to people like us that the Baptism of Jesus speaks.

"In the early church Jesus' baptism was observed as one of the three feasts of light, which also include Epiphany, marking the wise men's recognition of the true nature of the Christ child, and the wedding feast at Cana, at which Jesus performed his first miracle. These are feasts of light because they illuminate God's nature. They are three occasions on which God chose to reveal an aspect of God made flesh."<sup>1</sup>

"With his baptism Jesus fully identified with fallen humanity. Matthew has already tipped his hand in this regard. On page one of his gospel he lists forty-two men in Jesus' genealogy and four woman who, judged by the culture of the day had questionable pasts. Tamar was widowed twice, and then became a victim of incest when her father-in-law abused her (Genesis 38). Rahab was a foreigner and a prostitute who protected the Hebrew spies by lying. Ruth was a foreigner and a widow, while Bathsheba was the object of David's adulterous passion and murderous cover-up (Matthew 1:1-17). These women stick out like a sore thumb; but they nevertheless formed part of Jesus' family of origin.

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<sup>1</sup> "Marked for a purpose" by Kathleen Norris, in: *The Christian Century*, December 25, 2007, p 17

On page two, Matthew then honors the magi from the East who worshipped Jesus with their gifts and then page three brings us to his baptism.

Jesus' baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with what Luke describes as "all the people." He allied himself with the faults and failures, pains and problems, of all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us.

With his baptism Jesus intentionally takes sides with people in their neediness, and declares that God is biased in their favor: 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need' (Hebrews 4:15–16, NIV).

God's abundant mercy, Jesus declared, is available directly and immediately to every person; it's not the private preserve doled out by the temple establishment in Jerusalem.

Jesus' solidarity with broken people was vividly confirmed by divine affirmation and empowerment at his baptism. Still wet with water after his cousin had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision—the declaration of God the Creator that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus — that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied the Creator's unconditional acceptance of all people without exception."<sup>2</sup>

Our Isaiah text underscores this notion of Jesus' acceptance, describing a God who is not limited by our understanding of Jesus and his mission, a God who created humanity in

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<sup>2</sup> "Wading into the Waters: The Baptism of Jesus," The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself, Daniel B. Clendenin, Journey with Jesus Foundation, 2008.

the divine image and whose love for us is so great that it embraces all people, no exceptions. This God is beyond our understanding and our comfort zones.

It is on this Sunday, as we ordain elders and deacons, that we are reminded once again that God's nature was not only illuminated at Jesus' baptism to show us what God is like, but also who God wishes us to be.<sup>3</sup>

It is on this journey of growing in the image of God, of knowing that God became one of us that we might become more and more like God, that we are saddened at every service of ordination as we, in the Presbyterian Church (USA), still exclude some of our brothers and sisters based on their sexual orientation.

At the end of this month the issue surrounding ordination standards will come once again before our Presbytery at a special meeting at Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina. "Once again we have to ask ourselves how the church can say that there are some in society whose experience of God's love is unacceptable, whose voices must be muffled, whose lives cut off?"<sup>4</sup>

When we baptize we include all, when we mark each head with water, we do proclaim God's all inclusive, all embracing love ... why then do we reject the very same ones that we once baptized when it comes to the ordained ministry? Why with all the abundance of grace and love with which God embraces us, are we so reluctant to extend the same embrace to those deemed flawed by society?

May God illumine our hearts and minds anew so that we will recognize the God-given gifts in all of God's people, affirming their call to all ministries of the church to witness in a world desperately in need of love and acceptance. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Marked for a purpose" by Kathleen Norris, in: *The Christian Century* , December 25, 2007, p 17

<sup>4</sup> (Rev. Erin K. Swenson "God's Awe-Ful Love": <http://www.mlp.org/resources/sermons/aweful.html>)