

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Matthew 3:1–17

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

O God, the Three in One, you draw us into your community of love with people across the ages and around the world. By the same Spirit that binds us together speak to us that what we read and ponder may enliven us and stretch us to trust and follow you; through Christ our Savior.

Amen.

In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;

I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

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.”

One of my favorite things that we do in church is baptism. I love that, in our tradition, it is a sign of just how much God loves us. That as a community of faith we gather together, and we declare this love through the symbol of God choosing us, just as we are. Particularly when we baptize a baby, before we know who that child fully is, before we know what they may become, who they will love, what mark they may make in the world, we declare that God is for them, and they are claimed as God’s beloved and marked with a sign of that love on their forehead. It becomes our watermark – like on a fancy sheet of paper – an almost invisible thing that signifies to whom we belong.

Many of us, when we think of baptism, think of good things. Family gathered. Promises made. Celebration. The outdoor picnic and creek. I think of the baptism of my own children. The reaffirmation of baptism when I joined the church again as an adult, and at my ordination. Even at the conclusion and promises of baptism at my mother’s memorial

service, while I was sad that day, I also recall the comfort given me as we remembered her baptism in Christ.

Now, as a pastor, I've also had my own experiences when baptism hasn't gone so smoothly, or maybe the memories aren't all good. Baptisms, sometimes, aren't so clean. Stumbling over or saying the baby's name incorrectly. The toddler who cries and wants to run away from you after you put the water on their head. The almost dropping of the wriggling baby into the baptism font. The blow out when the baby is dressed in all white. Baptisms aren't always so nice.

John the Baptist isn't so nice in our scripture for today. People are coming to receive baptism and to hear John. John is preaching the coming of the Messiah. As he is preaching, the religious leaders show up – the Pharisees and the Sadducees – and he calls them names. He calls them snakes. That isn't so pleasant.

These are the religious people of the time. The leaders of the faith community. They may even be the pillars of the church, and he calls them names. He yells at them. And then he strikes at their very identity... telling them not to take heart in Abraham as their ancestor. John tells them that they cannot rest on their ancestry, that God can raise up children from the stones if God wanted to.

John's complaint, the reason he is yelling at these church leaders, is that he doesn't think they are reflecting God's desires and will in the world. They are not bearing good fruit. John tells them being a descendant of Abraham is not the mark of being one of God's children, bearing good fruit is.

He then turns and tells the people that Jesus is to come, that Jesus will be the mark of what it means to bear good fruit, and John tells them to repent. Repent is a pretty churchy word. It's not one we hear much

outside of Lent, really. I can never recall hearing the word outside of a church context. Repent is to turn away from something. It can be a harsh word. It can bring about shame. For many, it has a negative connotation. “Don’t do this.” It can be a harsh word.

Sometimes we think of repent, or repentance as saying you’re sorry. Or better, that you’re really, really, sorry and will never do it again – whatever “it” is – again. And, sure, that’s a part of repentance but, honestly, a pretty small part. The heart of the word repentance means turning around, starting over, taking another direction, choosing another course. All of those actions by their nature call into question the value or rightness of one’s current behavior.

My father-in-law would frequently joke with me that preaching was easy, all I had to tell people, he said, was “turn or burn.” He was joking, mostly. It was the theology he was taught as a young man, and it stayed with him, I think, for most of his life. But the joke always bothered me a bit. Because I’m not sure what the good news is in that message.

I like the idea of turning, but more like the flower turns toward the sun to be nourished. Turning where it is less about what is wrong with what we’re doing now and, instead, about what is right and important and necessary and how we might move toward that. Turn, and see the kingdom of heaven. Instead of turning away from something, maybe it’s about turning toward something. A new way of being. A new life. A new sense of the presence of God. Turning toward the kingdom of heaven and a world marked by shalom, mercy, and peace. This is good news. The good news is that we can turn toward the kingdom of heaven because it is here among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

John says, our identity is placed there, with the beloved son with whom God is pleased. I don’t think John’s message is one of judgement, it is a word of love and invitation. (OK, maybe he’s a little judgy toward

some). John invites people to recognize that God's beloved has come near, turn toward him. Jesus enters into the story to show us what righteousness really looks like. Jesus shows us what can happen when you know you are a beloved child of God. Jesus is a reminder for us to remember that we are beloved, to understand our identity starts and ends there.

It starts and ends with Jesus who loves us and is the one who wades into the water with us. The one, as John says, "to fulfill all righteousness." What is right, is that we are claimed by God and have our identity as beloved children of God. What is "right" is our relationship with God through Jesus. We are brought into kinship with God, into relationship with God through Jesus and in our baptism. We rest with our new identity as a beloved child of God.

Pastor Osheta Moore, writes, "belovedness...undoes our striving and proving..." She says, we are tired because we "are constantly proving [our] worth and unsure how to measure [our] efficacy. Instead, the only thing [we] should be focused on is owning [our] belovedness, proclaiming [other's] belovedness, and working to become the Beloved Community."ⁱ

We may carry or claim many markers of our identity. It seems as if it could be an unending list of how others or we ourselves measure and mark our identity. Our jobs, orientations, race, relationships, in our political affiliation, or economic status. The list could go on.

However, our primary identity is as a child of God. In our baptism God names and claims us as "beloved." It's not that all these other names or identifiers are worthless; some of them may be quite important to us. Rather, it's that while all these other names, affiliations, and identifications may *describe* us, they dare not *define* us, as only the name of beloved we receive in baptism gives us our life in Christ.

Similarly, the theologian and priest Henri Nouwen says, “Many voices ask for our attention. There is a voice that says, ‘Prove that you are a good person.’ Another voice says, ‘You’d better be ashamed of yourself.’ There also is a voice that says, ‘Nobody really cares about you,’ and one that says, ‘Be sure to become successful, popular, and powerful.’ But underneath all these often very noisy voices is a still, small voice that says, ‘You are my Beloved, my favor rests on you.’ That’s the voice we need most of all to hear.”ⁱⁱ

Nouwen continues, “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 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... When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses 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 nobody... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned...’ Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the Beloved. Being the beloved constitutes the truth of our existence.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Knowing, trusting that identity as a beloved child of God is so very important. The baptism of Jesus and him hearing the voice that he is “Beloved” happens early in the story. Before Jesus preaches his sermon on the mount. Before he heals anyone. Before he feeds thousands. Before he faces hate, ridicule, and persecution. Before he gathers his disciples to join him in the work of reconciliation, justice, love, and

mercy he insists that he be baptized. Before all of this, he feels the water splash over his head and he hears the words, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Perhaps, knowing the path ahead of him, knowing the amount of work, the frustration, the condemnation, the amount of suffering he would see, knowing there would be people who would ignore his call to a more just and equitable world, knowing that his ministry would lead to a violent end, maybe he needed to start that journey first by hearing about his belovedness.

I have said before to you and I will say again to you, that following Jesus is not an easy path. Choosing to follow in the steps of Jesus means making difficult and hard decisions. It may mean turning away from the familiar into the unknown, it may mean sacrificing comfort for justice, it may mean taking a stand when your legs are shaky at best, it may mean being willing to ask questions when you would rather not. Following Jesus may mean a lot of things, but rarely is it easy.

So friends, when there are those hard times, when there are those days where you wonder if it is worth it, when there are those moments when it feels as if nothing you are doing is working or helping, in those moments, I invite you to turn your face upward. I invite you to be still and listen for the voice, that voice that will whisper to you, “You are my child, you are beloved.”

You are beloved.

You are beloved.

You are beloved.

ⁱ Osheta Moore, “Dear White Peacemakers: Dismantling Racism with Grit and Grace.” Page 50.

ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, “Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith.” Page 14

ⁱⁱⁱ Nouwen, “Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World” page 3--33