

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
January 8, 2023
Matthew 3:1–6, 13–17

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.

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.”

There is a pastor here in Minneapolis, that tells a story about his family.ⁱ His great-grandfather bought a cottage on Otsego Lake in New York in 1906, and it has been in his family ever since. It has served as a retreat for many generations. This pastor’s last name is Lose, whereas the last name of his great-grandfather, and many of the relatives that use the cabin still, is Gotwald. Lose says that whenever he is at the cabin, he uses the last name of Gotwald. He does this because identifying in this way makes him instantly recognizable to other residents and business owners in the town who know the extended family. Using the name Gotwald meant that he belonged. That he belonged to a particular family, and that family was known in that town. He says, in fact, a few summers back that he was trying to explain to a local official why he shouldn’t have to pay the non-resident fee for the parking tags at the local boat launch, and that all the official’s objections faded once he said he was a Gotwald. The name was recognized, and it means something in that community.

This story of Jesus’ baptism, a baptism which we share, reminds us that there is a family to which we are a part of, and there is a name we share, “beloved.” Our baptism isn’t a one-time activity that happened to us many years ago. Rather, it is a moniker, and identity, that is a dynamic, present-tense reality. It helps provide an identity. We are beloved. We are children of God.

We hold a lot of different names and identities. We are defined by so many things – our jobs, our families, our gender, our sexuality, our race – and those are important. In baptism, God has given us a primary identity, beloved. While many of the identities I named describe us, it is not the thing that ultimately defines us. Among the many things that

make up my identity, I am husband, father, son, brother, pastor, man, Minnesotan, Packer fan, but that does not define me, it only describes me. But my life is defined as a baptized and beloved child of God. We have been given an amazing family name.

And while I believe everything I just said, wholeheartedly, I also recognize that there are elements of this baptism that I sometimes skip over but are important. This baptism takes place in the wilderness. It's not a baptism that is set in a beautiful sanctuary. Rather it's in the wild. There seems to be some risk here. Even as we hear Jesus being called "beloved," it's not completely neat.

All of the Gospels tell the story of Jesus' baptism. In Mark's telling it is even more dramatic than the account in Matthew. When the dove descends upon Jesus, it says the heavens are torn apart as the dove descends. This language is the same wording used to describe the tearing of the temple cloth at Jesus' death. God rends the heavens apart to get to Jesus to tell him he is beloved. This is not a tame and mild baptism, this is urgent, this is immediate, this is profound. Can you imagine? God is so determined to let Jesus know how much he is loved that nothing will get in the way, he is found in the wilderness and the heavens are torn apart in order for God to declare God's love.

There is also the message to repent that we get from John the Baptist. I've told you before that I think "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 small part. The heart of the word repentance means turning around, starting over, taking another direction, choosing another course.

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 justice, 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.

The good news is that we don't have to stay where we are. We get to turn to a new thing. We can live into our identity as a new person in Christ and as a beloved child of God. Our identity starts and ends there and is active. Repentance is that opportunity to become aware of when we fall short and turn toward the way of God. Turn toward God's deep desire for us to be a partner in justice, peace, and equity for all God's people.

Now, at the risk of giving you a New Year's resolution, I want us to take a moment and invite us to consider where we may need to turn toward God. And, it doesn't have to be big, or all-encompassing. Think for a moment. As you think, I'm going to throw out some prompts, some ideas that might spur your imagination.

What is one area, or element of your life, just one, of which you would like to repent, that is, change direction? Is there an unhealthy relationship you want to repair or address? Can you imagine using your time differently and toward better ends? Is there some practice or habit

you might take up that would produce more abundant life for you or those around them?

Can you identify one element of our communal lives that needs repentance and to think how you can contribute to that. Maybe it's finding a new way to volunteering your time. Perhaps it's thinking about an organization or cause to which you would like to donate.? Maybe you want to get to know someone who is quite different from yourself, ethnically or politically or generationally, and try to build a more robust community in this way? Or perhaps there is something that sparks your imagination, or you have heard about, but you are unfamiliar with. Can you identify one communal issue, learn about it, teach others or maybe begin praying for it daily, open to how God might direct your time and actions to contributing to change?

There are many opportunities to discern God's call, to see where we have left the path, and turn toward God's vision for us and our communities once again. Whatever else John the Baptist was, he was first and foremost a witness to the coming Christ, and a herald of the inbreaking presence of Christ and his beloved-ness. In the same way, through our own baptism, we share in the work of Christ in the world. Our words and witness continue to matter and to make a difference in the lives of people. As beloved children of God, this is the calling of our baptism. To join in the work of creating the kingdom of heaven here on earth. We are co-workers in the mission of God in the world.

One of the ways this is manifested in the church is through the calling of Elders and Deacons. Today is a special day in the life of the church, as we see the ministry of baptism played out by ordaining and installing new leaders at Oak Grove.

The *Book of Order* calls ordained deacons to a ministry of “compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress” (G-2.0201). A pretty heady job description. In addition, the role of Elder and the description of the responsibilities of a session, at one point included the charge to ruling elders to “lead the congregation in ministries of personal and social healing and reconciliation in the communities in which the church lives and bears its witness” (*Book of Order*, 2009–11 version, G-10.0102g). Also, a daunting description and charge. But we also know God equips people to this work, and that it is done together. Our baptism is the source of our calling. Our baptism calls us to faithfulness and discipleship and calls us to trust that God equips us for the ministry of being co-workers in the world with Christ.

As we ordain and install these new leaders in a few moments, I also invite you to remember your own baptism, remember that you are a beloved child of God. Remember, and give thanks for your baptism and let us all lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. Amen.

¹ <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/baptism-of-our-lord-a-family-name/#comment-377679>