

Matthew's Gospel goes from Jesus being a toddler being visited by the magi to today's story where we find Jesus to be around 30 years old. That's a big gap. If it wasn't for Luke's Gospel, we wouldn't know anything at all about Jesus' growing up years. But maybe that wasn't what was important to the Gospel writers? Before today's story, we're introduced to Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist- Zechariah and Elizabeth's son. You know the one who is most compared to the prophet Elijah?! John the Baptizer knows that he is unworthy to carry Jesus' sandals much less baptize him, as John baptizes with water and Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. But Jesus tells John that he must baptize him in order to fulfill all righteousness.

"Righteousness" is a favorite term of Matthew's and it means "right conduct, correct observance, in accordance with God's will as revealed in scripture" (*HCSB*). In the church, we've just finished the Christmas season (the tree and all the other festive decorations have been put away) and now we find ourselves in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany means "manifestation" or revelation. "Just as the magi came from a distant land to worship the Christ child, God's covenant of grace is extended to all people who believe the good news of Jesus Christ" (*Book of Common Worship (PCUSA)*). It's interesting that of today's story theologian Martin Luther said that out of all epiphanies that Jesus' baptism was most important because this is God's sermon. And who can preach better than God? God's sermon, in today's biblical text, summarizes everything we need to know about Jesus and ourselves. It is the chief of all epiphanies. But before we read today's scripture, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 3:13-17.**

I'm going to call him Zach to maintain confidentiality. I met Zach as a college student some years ago at Vanderbilt. He is multi-talented, extremely intelligent and has a huge heart for the underserved. What many people don't know is that Zach suffers from anxiety. Big time. His thoughts go to battle in his mind and the fundamental church upbringing he had keeps coming up to side with his anxious thoughts. One night I preached on baptism, and Zach nervously approached me with his head down. I asked him what was going on, and he told me that he never had been baptized. We later met for coffee to talk about it, and he said that he hadn't been baptized because when he came of age to make that decision for himself he didn't feel worthy. He felt like he wasn't good enough to be baptized. One of the reasons he felt this way is he heard his pastor saying he was unworthy, and he hung onto those words.

While our God is before all time, heard through the ages, God is also with us in this moment. Yet, how can we trust that ancient words are sturdy enough to carry contemporary distress? Like the Poison song Charles sang, we all want something we can believe in. In today's story, God delivers, if we care to see, hear, and believe it. Imagine what John must have been thinking when he looked up and saw Jesus standing there at the Jordan River. I wonder if he quickly thought to extend his hand out to Jesus?! I seriously doubt it because John knew that he was inferior to the ONE coming. John hesitates. Maybe he hesitates at the water's edge because he is shocked, humiliated, awed or just intimidated by Jesus' presence and at his request to be baptized?

Whatever the reason, John seems to feel unworthy. What do we know about feeling unworthy? What do we know about not feeling good enough? Scripture tells us that John wasn't worthy to untie or carry Jesus' sandals. He tries to get out of baptizing Jesus. "I need to be baptized by YOU and do you come to me?" And Jesus says, "John, I need YOU to baptize ME SO THAT all righteousness will be fulfilled."

Besides being in accordance with God's will, why is Jesus' baptism important to us? John's baptism was about repentance, and Jesus was free from sin. Jesus didn't need to repent. Yet, Jesus' baptism shows that he identifies with us as sinners. Jesus does this to be in solidarity with the people for he is Emmanuel, God with us. His baptism symbolizes the sinners' baptism into the righteousness of Christ, dying with Him and rising free from sin, able to walk in the newness of life. Jesus' ministry to bring in God's rule was inaugurated in his baptism. But standing at the water's edge, Zach was hesitant because he thought that in order to be baptized he had to have his life completely together- that's what he heard his pastor say. Friends, if that were the truth, none of us would be baptized. I was baptized as an infant, a decision made by my parents, but I later chose to be confirmed- to profess my faith-even in my doubting-and try to live in obedience to God. I believe that God knows, loves and claims us as God's own before we're even born- when we're being knitted together in our mothers' wombs. God's love and grace know no bounds.

A friend sent me a TikTok [video](#) this week of a little boy, named Luke, who looked to be about four or five years old. He had on a gray, furry costume and had filled up the bathtub and announced that his was ready. "Ready for what?" Luke's grandmother asked him. "For the baptism," he said. Luke proceeded to walk her into the bathroom and showed her his stuffed animal police dog, Chase, from the children's cartoon Paw Patrol. He told his grandmother that it was time for Chase to be "bababaptized." Luke concluded, pointing to the tub, "and there's the water." Much to the grandmother's surprise accompanied by a chuckle, she asked Luke, "Are you sure Chase wants to be baptized?" To which Luke responded, "Yes, he needs the Holy Ghost." Luke then told his grandmother that he has several other toys to baptize but not today. "I baptize him on this choice day," Luke says. He then climbs into the tub with his "robe" on and begins to sing, "Take me to the water." "Nothing but the waters," Luke sings. And then he mimics what he has heard his preacher say in church during a baptism. Luke says, "Obedient to God's command...I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." And then he grabs Chase's nose and dunks him into the water. Now while this was a precious video, and I laughed and laughed as I played it over and over...what strikes me is 1) what Luke picked up about baptism from being in church and 2) how he believed that baptism was for all, even his stuffed animals. Luke knows about God's grace and claim upon him AND he wants his stuffed animals to know it as well.

When Jesus is baptized by John, the heavens open, which tells us that God is about to speak- a theophany is about to take place. And the Spirit of God descends like a dove- not a hawk or a crow but a dove. This is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit- the real deal. Talk about giving us something to believe in?! Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters of creation like the flapping of a bird, this was a new creation. God lays his hands on Jesus in the form of the Spirit and a claim is made. A claim we can't earn by what we do. A claim we can't earn by who we are. A claim we can't earn by what we believe. When Jesus is baptized by John, a naming occurs- an identity is given. BELOVED. Jesus hasn't done anything at this point- that's because being beloved doesn't depend at all on anything we do. That's right- God's love for us isn't contingent on anything we do. God has loved us into being and doesn't require anything from us before naming and claiming us. **Baptized or not. Believing or not.** As the voice from heaven spoke when Jesus emerged from Jordan's waters, so God speaks to us. God's love for us is real! Talk about giving us something to believe in?! Baptism acknowledges our belovedness. None of us are ever good enough to be baptized. It's not about how good we are. It's about how good and faithful God is. In the waters of baptism, grace upon grace is poured out upon us.

Just because we're baptized doesn't mean we no longer sin or that evil and temptations will no longer be around us. This Christian journey is a process. Theologian Karl Barth says that it's not the wrath of God we should fear but rather the love of God...because the love of God will strip away everything that stands between us and God" (Mike Ferguson).

Right after Jesus was baptized, he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness for 40 days. His identity was challenged and mocked..."If you are the Son of God..." For us, our baptisms are the first act of our Christian lives. And that first act for each of us or our parents on our behalf is a renunciation or a challenge that says, "I am a beloved child of God, and I renounce anything or anyone who says otherwise." Rachel Held-Evans, a young prolific writer and theologian who died several years ago, says "Baptism is a renunciation of all those competing voices that try to tell us who we are. The world gives us names according to the color of our skin, or who are parents are or aren't, or where we went to school or didn't go or how much money we make or don't make or where we are from or not from. Names such as screw-up, cheater, fake, addict, failure. The world beckons with these other names but in baptism, just like Jesus, we're named Beloved child of God and that is enough" (theworkofthepeople.com). There is no "we'll be children of God when..." We'll be children of God when we get our act together. We'll be children of God when we get married and have children. We'll be children of God when we stop mistreating our neighbor. We'll be children of God when we beat the addiction. We'll be children of God when we stop having doubts. **Friends, by God's grace we're beloved children of God now!**

Baptism marks us, identifies us for the beginning of our faith journey not just for the end. In baptism, we die with Christ...we die to our old ways of life and are raised with Christ into a new way of living. Again, just because we are baptized doesn't mean that we are exempt from

terrifying dangers. In fact, baptism can intensify such dangers. As Martin Luther put it, every day we must wake up and volunteer for death, praying to God to finish in us that which was begun in our baptism. Therefore, we must put our hand in water and on our heads and remember our baptism. Because we are children of God who live around the font and often hesitate at the water's edge, Jesus calls us to repent: to change how we make decisions, to take charge over those voices telling us who we are, to change how we treat others and ourselves, to change where we give our hard earned money...to change the way that we live... not just once a year but every day of every year! Upon our deaths here on earth, our baptisms will be complete.

What Zach's pastor didn't say is that yes, we're unworthy, BUT God's grace makes us worthy even though we can't earn grace. God, who is merciful and loving, is still speaking and isn't finished with us yet! God puts a comma where that pastor put a period. "Our greatest challenge and struggle in the Christian life is to take God's name for us, to believe we're beloved and to believe that is enough" (Held-Evans, p. 19). And our second biggest challenge as Christians is to believe that even those we don't like, even our enemies are beloved in God's eyes. "The good news is that you're a beloved child of God; the bad news is you don't get to choose your siblings" (Nadia Bolz-Weber). It is only by the grace of God through Jesus Christ that we are all beloved and redeemed. I am talking to you, Beloved. Let's break down that identity of Beloved and go and Be love to others because we're beloved by God. Remember your baptism and live in the light! Amen!