

The wise ones have gone home by another way and now the season of Epiphany is upon us- the winter season of light, the time of revelation, and of the showing forth of glory. The account of Jesus' baptism is found in all four Gospels. In Matthew's Gospel we find a huge gap from toddler Jesus to 30 year old Jesus in today's story. If it wasn't for one story in Luke's Gospel when Jesus was twelve in the temple, we wouldn't know anything at all about Jesus' wonder years at all. But maybe that wasn't what was important to the Gospel writers? In today's story, we're 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" (*Harper Collins Study Bible*). 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.**

Imagine what John must have been thinking when he looked up and saw Jesus standing there at the Jordan River. Imagine what the crowd

gathered to also be baptized by John thought. I wonder if John quickly thought to extend his hand out to Jesus or perhaps he didn't recognize him at first?! John knew that he was inferior to the ONE coming. But how did John know the guy standing in front of him, asking to be baptized, was the ONE coming?! Maybe John 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. But Jesus says, "John, I need YOU to baptize ME SO THAT all righteousness will be fulfilled." John tries to talk Jesus out of what Jesus is trying to get John to do, "which- take my word for it- never works" (Nadia Bolz Weber, [sermon](#))- been there, done that. How about you?

But 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. Perhaps Jesus does this to be in solidarity with the people gathered at the water's edge 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. Yes, John finally gives in and baptizes Jesus in the Jordan- "and then things get crazy- heavens open up, the

Spirit descends and God speaks. It's like the heavens could not contain the Gospel love of God and it just had to spill out over everything" (Bolz-Weber). A quick aside- in the season of Epiphany we begin with Jesus' baptism and end with the transfiguration, both which have the heavens opening up and God speaking- which is called a theophany. The crazy thing is that God is basically speaking the same words about Jesus both times. In Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism, God says, "This is my son," not "You are my son," as in Luke and Mark's versions. This is because Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish out of all the gospels and thus it is here that God is introducing Jesus as His son, the Messiah, to the people of Israel. Therefore, the single most important thing that Matthew wants to say about Jesus is that he is God's Son. This is the confession that gives birth to the church. Yet notice that God's confirmation and announcement takes place "before Jesus had really done anything. Think about that" (Bolz-Weber). God lays his hands on Jesus in the form of the Spirit and a claim is made. When we are baptized with Christ and into Christ, God also makes a claim on us. 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. 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.

This week with the news of Phillip Yancey's, the author of *What's So Amazing About God's Grace?*, infidelity and the horrific shooting death of Renee Good in Minneapolis and the injuries inflicted in Oregon involving more ICE officials, I feel lots of overwhelming feelings. I thought of something I heard once from someone regarding politics. "If I can label you, I can destroy you." What have we become in this country? I don't have words and that speaks volumes! Have we forgotten God's claim on us? How have we been called by God to treat ourselves and our neighbors? How do we both receive and offer the grace that's been given to us? Just because we're baptized doesn't mean we no longer sin or that evil and temptations will no longer be around us. Note though that baptism in Matthew's Gospel story is not about Othering. It's about solidarity. About joining. About belonging. Yet, in our world, there are walls that we build that keep us from seeing and loving each other as reflections of the divine image. Two of those walls- dehumanization and contempt- are at work in and around us. This is evil- like "get behind me, Satan," evil, and we must renounce it! "Dehumanization is a process. It begins with language- labels that create distance, categories that strip away particularity, rhetoric that turns a person into a problem. It is a permission structure that allows us to turn aside from violence or even justify it. Once we stop seeing someone as fully human, we stop grieving what happens to them. We explain it. We justify it. We defend it. We look

away. The Gospel addresses this directly. Because we are held in God's grace, we are free to tell the truth. We don't have to defend deception to protect an allegiance. Because we're made in God's image, we can insist on the dignity of every human being, especially when the world is busy sorting people into those who matter and those who don't" (Rev. Chris Henry, facebook post). At baptism, the person being baptized or their parents if they're too young to answer for themselves, are asked three questions. The first question, which we'll answer soon, is, "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" Yes, I renounce them and anything that draws me away from God's love. Diana Butler Bass writes, "These renunciations before baptism are the first words from generations of those who have come to water's edge to follow, for forgiveness, for whatever reason. To be sprinkled with grace, dunked in mercy-named and washed by divine love. And the rite starts with repudiating the devil and evil and sin. We don't talk about Satan and evil and not-love very much but they remain- in the beginning of our life in community and in our life with God. At baptism, the turning away from evil opens the path toward a renewed self and commitments of compassion for others. Rejecting evil isn't enough; embracing love is the journey" (*The [Cottage](#)*).

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 our 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 is one of the thin places where the extraordinary of God’s grace blesses the ordinary water sprinkled on us or that we stand in. 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. 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. 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.

"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). Theologian Paul Tillich says that the most challenging aspect of grace is receiving it. Let that soak in. Another huge challenge for us as Christians is to believe that even those we don't like, even those who do wrong, 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). Y'all. This is the good news of the Gospel and this is why faith is all that easy and it's all that hard. Someone once said, "It's not that Christianity has been tried and found lacking; it's that it's been tried and found to be hard." It is only by the grace of God through Jesus Christ that we are all beloved and redeemed. Everyone is someone's somebody, especially God's, and we must never forget to be love in the world! Amen!