

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

A: The Baptism of Our Lord Sunday
Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17

15 January 2023
Salem, Bridgeport

“Dedications, Baptisms, Confirmations...AND MORE!”

Can you just imagine what it would have been like to be Jesus waiting on the banks of the Jordan River that day? He had heard from his parents the stories of how the Spirit had been at work in his life from his conception and birth and dedication at the temple, and he had treasured those stories and they had planted within him a desire to know all he could about the faith in which he had been raised. He remembered his bar mitzvah and how exciting it had been to share in conversation with the leaders at the temple in Jerusalem – so exciting that he’d quite lost track of time & missed the traveling party when they had departed! He smiled as he remembered how upset his parents had been with him, and how silly he had thought them at the time. But that had been so long ago – 18 years in fact. True, he had always felt in the depths of his being that he was here on earth for some great plan, the stories that had been told him confirmed that, and certainly he had had experiences of God speaking to him over the years, but he had never known exactly when or how God’s larger purpose and plan for him would be made clear. Until last night. Last night he had dreamed that he was being baptized by his cousin John. John was pushing him under the water and holding him and just when he thought he could hold his breath no longer, he awoke! The dream had been so real he could still feel the coolness of the water on his skin. And he was left with the knowledge that this was what he HAD to do. He must find John and be baptized! After inquiring as to John’s whereabouts in the village, he quickly made his way to that spot on the River. Despite the early hour, there was already a crowd gathered, and a line had formed in front of what seemed to be 2 of John’s disciples. He got in the line. When the disciple called out to John, “Jesus bar Joseph from Nazareth in Galilee”, he waded into the water. This was his dream – and his body vibrated with anticipation. But when he got there, John surprised him by refusing to baptize him, murmuring something about how Jesus should baptize HIM! Jesus suddenly saw that this was about submitting – not to John – but to God who was working through John. Was he ready to do whatever it was that God asked? Was he willing to give up everything he was and everything he had and commit his life totally to God? There was still time to back out... But all he could think of was that dream – about the excitement of going into that water! He KNEW God was calling him to do this and that it was vitally important & he couldn’t wait a minute longer! “Just DO IT!” said Jesus to John. “NOW!” And John did. In the water it was just like in his dream – there was no past, no future, just this eternal NOW moment. It wasn’t like he was on earth or in heaven – he was just suspended between the two as if he was in a watery womb in heaven & being born into an earthly existence. There was a roaring in his ears and for some reason the words of Psalm 29 came to mind:
*“The voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders;
...The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice; the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees... The voice of the LORD bursts forth in lightning flashes.
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness... The voice of the LORD makes oak trees writhe & strips forests bare.
And in the temple of the LORD all are crying, “Glory!”
The LORD sits enthroned above the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forevermore.”*
And then he was up, out of the water, and the thunder became words,
“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”
Tears, mixed with the river water, flowed down his cheeks, as his heart overflowed with joy. Finally! It was time. Time for what exactly he wasn’t sure, but the time had come for God’s purpose and plan for his life to be made clear – of that he was sure!

None of us knows for sure what was going on in Jesus' mind that day,
but this is what I imagine it might have been like for him.
And I share this with you because of what I believe it means for our lives.

Jesus had already been dedicated to God at the temple when he was an infant
and he had already become a bar mitzvah when he became a man.
In the anabaptist denominations those rites of passage are dedication and baptism;
in our tradition we call those rites of passage at birth and puberty baptism and confirmation.

The point is that this baptism of Jesus cannot be compared to our baptism or our confirmation.
What Jesus experienced in his baptism was something different from the prescribed rites of his faith tradition.
It was something more,
something that God does in a person's life beyond those predictable, public rites –
something that builds on them and personalizes them.

From Jesus' conception God had a plan and a purpose for his life,
& God worked in Jesus' life from his conception on to prepare him to carry out that purpose.
And then, when Jesus was ready and the time was right, God came to him in a way that made it clear to him
that it was time to move on into the active phase of his life's purpose.

And what that involved was 2 things: Jesus' willingness to submit to God
and his subsequent experience of God communicating with him in a dramatic way.

I believe that's how God works in our lives, too.

From our very conception God has a plan and a purpose for our lives,
and God works in our lives from conception on to prepare us to carry out that purpose,
and then when the time is right, God comes to us in a way that makes it clear to us
that it's time for us to do something new, or move in a new direction, or fulfill a new calling.
But in order for God to move us on into that next stage where we are actively carrying out mission in life,
we must begin where Jesus began – with submitting all that we have and all that we are to God.
And when we do that, God will show up in a powerful and life-changing way.

Maybe that's already happened to you, or maybe you are still waiting for that to happen,
but either way, here is the good news I want to share with you today:
what God spoke to Jesus, God speaks to you, too:
"You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased."

Think about that for a moment.
Look around at the people in this room.
Think about all the people in your life.
Do you think God is well pleased with them?
Do you think God is well pleased with you?

I know I try hard to please God, but I know equally well, that I continue to falter and fail,
that I don't pray enough or worship enough or study God's word enough,
that I don't always have the faith and hope and love that I should have,
that I'm not grateful or thankful enough for my blessings.
I am fully aware that God has plenty of reasons to be displeased with me.
And I am sure God has plenty of reasons to be displeased with you.

But here's the thing.
You remember those words from the Psalm about the power of God's Word?
You remember how at another time – far before Jesus' baptism –
God spoke over the waters and the Spirit was there hovering?
Of course you do, because you know that in the beginning God spoke
and what God spoke manifested, became true, became real.

In the beginning, God spoke Light and there was Light.
At Jesus' baptism, God spoke, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased".
And to you, God says, "You are my beloved child and with you I am well-pleased."

And it doesn't matter what you have done or have failed to do in the past.
It doesn't matter whether you have been a saint or a sinner.
It doesn't matter whether you have been a success or a failure.
It doesn't matter whether you have listened to God, submitted to God, and committed to God,
or whether you have failed to listen and submit and commit.

When God speaks those words to you, God speaks them in the present moment,
and your past has not only been forgiven, but forgotten.
In that moment of grace, God sees you as God created you –
a perfect likeness of God, a beautiful person, a beloved child –
& God sees all of the potential God has planted within you to carry out your purpose & plan.

I know that probably most, if not all, of you here in this room have been baptized,
and most, if not all, of you have been confirmed,
but what I want you to know is that there is something beyond baptism & confirmation –
there is a time when God comes to us personally
in a clear way to commission us to carry out the plan God has for us.

Maybe there are folks out there in cyberspace who have not been baptized,
and if that's the case, I hope you will contact me or a local church or pastor,
so that you can experience that life-changing event.

But for each and everyone of you, here today and out there whenever,
I pray that God has either already commissioned you or that God will do so in the future, just as God did for Jesus.

Some people receive their commissioning early.
Mary was probably only 13.
But for many it comes later in life.
Jesus had to wait until he was 30 before that time came.
Abraham had to wait until he was 75, and Sarah until she was 65.
Moses had to spend 40 years as a shepherd so he probably had to wait until he was about 60.
David was anointed as king as a young boy but had to wait for years before he was crowned.
Whenever it comes, it will be when the time is right –
when God has prepared you and when God has prepared the world for you.

But the important thing is not to miss the opportunity to submit to God and follow God's will.

That's what Jesus did that day at the Jordan River.
And when he submitted to God's will, God said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."
And because Jesus submitted to God's will, the whole world was changed.

That's what Martin Luther King did, and because of what he did, the whole world was changed.
And the same can be true for you.

When you hear God's call – no matter when it comes – and you submit to God's will, then God will say to you
what he said to Jesus and to King and to every other person who submits to God,
"You are my beloved child. With you I am well-pleased!"

And so, let me close with a prayer for you, based on Paul's words in Romans 12.1-2
*May you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,
not being conformed to this world, but being transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.* Amen