

“The Beloved”
Matthew 3:13-17
Sunday, January 9, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Brett Blair shares these messages from God, which were purchased anonymously by some guy in September 1998 at the Smith Agency in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. A rep from the ad agency said that their agreement with this individual prohibited them from releasing his name but he did say that the person is quite well known. Here are the 15 messages, signed by God, that have appeared on billboards and buses:

1. Let's Meet at My House Sunday Before the Game. -- God
2. C'mon Over and Bring the Kids. -- God
3. What Part of "Thou Shalt Not ..." Didn't You Understand? -- God
4. We Need to Talk. -- God
5. Keep Using My Name in Vain And I'll Make Rush Hour Longer. -- God
6. Loved the Wedding, Invite Me to the Marriage. -- God
7. That "Love Thy Neighbor" Thing, I Meant It. -- God
8. I Love You ... I Love You ... I Love You. -- God
9. Will The Road You're on Get You to My Place? -- God
10. Follow Me. -- God
11. My Way Is the Highway. -- God
12. Need Directions? -- God
13. (This one appears during the Summer) You Think It's Hot Here? -- God

14. Tell the Kids I Love Them. -- God

15. Have You Read My #1 Best Seller? There Will Be a Test. — God

I like all of these advertisements for God. The one that applies the best this morning is #8, “I love you...I love you...I love you – God.” First God identifies Jesus as the Beloved, with a dove from heaven at his baptism. Then God includes you and me, through our own baptisms, in the company of the beloved.

I. Why did Jesus need to be baptized; theology of Jesus’ baptism.

One might ask the question, why does Jesus need to be baptized at all? After all, he has no sins of which to repent. He does not require salvation.

William Barclay describes two reasons for Jesus’ baptism by John. One is that John the Baptist has started “an unprecedented movement towards God.” Jesus wanted to identify himself with the movement of the people towards God. He wanted the start of his earthly ministry to be connected with this movement.

The second reason for Jesus to be baptized by John was to receive confirmation and guidance from God. At Jesus’ baptism, God said to him, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

“You are my beloved son” – this phrase comes from Psalm 2:7 and refers to the Messianic King. “In whom I am well pleased” – this phrase is part of Isaiah 42:1 and refers to the servant of the Lord whose story culminates in the sufferings of Isaiah 53.

So Jesus learns, at his baptism, that he is the Messiah, God's Anointed King; and that he is to experience suffering and a cross, not power and glory. “The baptism shows us Jesus asking for God's approval and receiving the destiny of the cross.”

Walter Rauschenbusch describes it this way: Jesus' baptism is a great swinging door in divine history – “the exit from the kingdom of Evil and the entrance to the kingdom of God.” With the act of being baptized, Jesus begins his earthly ministry, and the kingdom of God is inaugurated. “A great swinging Door” stands forever, marking the place and the time when everything changed.

II. How, through our baptism, we share in being “beloved” of God.

Everything changed for all of humanity down through time.

Everything also changed for us as individuals. Now we have the chance, through our own baptisms, to be changed as well.

Baptism is a beginning. Jesus is our example. As Jesus' baptism serves as the start of his earthly ministry, so our baptism is a starting place for our personal and shared ministries in Christ.

Some may view baptism as an arrival, a culmination. I'm baptized; that means I'm saved now.

Well, in a way.

I love Garrison Keillor. He's so hilarious. William B. Kinkaid, in his book, And Then Came the Angel, writes:

“Garrison Keillor tells the story of Larry the Sad Boy. Larry the Sad Boy was saved twelve times, which is an all-time record in the Lutheran Church. In the Lutheran Church there is no altar call, no organist playing ‘Just As I Am,’ and no minister with shiny hair manipulating the congregation. These are Lutherans, and they repent the same way that they sin -- discreetly

and tastefully. Keillor writes, ‘Granted, we’re born in original sin and are worthless and vile, but twelve conversions is too many. God didn’t mean us to feel guilty all our lives. There comes a point when you should dry your tears and join the building committee and start grappling with the problems of the church furnace and the church roof and make church coffee and be of use.’ ”

One baptism is quite enough. In fact, in the United Methodist Church, one baptism is all that is allowed. We recognize Christian baptism, no matter what denomination one comes from. If you are baptized Roman Catholic, or Lutheran -- or even Baptist! – you are covered! Baptism is not a symbol of our own worthiness; it is a symbol of God’s grace and love, despite our unworthiness.

Martin Luther, in moments of despair, would say to himself as a reminder, “I am baptized.” Baptism is meant to be a source of encouragement and strength. Baptism gives us our identity, our sense of belonging. We are Christians. This is our name. This is our community, our family, our odd collection of sinful brothers and sisters who love God and seek to serve Him!

Kincaid reminds us of “the episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* in which the Women’s Historical Society had discovered that a living descendant of a Revolutionary War hero was living right there in Mayberry. The news generated excitement and curiosity throughout the town as people made plans for recognizing the hero’s relative. Barney Fife, of course, twisted his own family tree to the point that he put himself in line for the honor. The rest of the townspeople felt special just because someone among them was related to the hero.

“Everyone was shocked when the news came. A careful analysis of the genealogical records determined that the hero’s descendant was Otis Campbell, the town drunk. Despite instructions to find a ‘substitute Otis’ for the presentation, the real Otis showed up for the

ceremony. When the ladies gave him the plaque which they had engraved especially for him, Otis gave the plaque to the town. He said, 'Just because you're the descendant of a hero doesn't make you one. So I would like to present this plaque to the town of Mayberry, to which I am just proud to belong.' ”

This is what baptism means. We're just proud to belong. We may not feel deserving. We certainly are NOT deserving, whatever our feelings on the subject might be. Point is, God does not require that we be deserving. God requires only that we make the choice to belong. The act of baptism is an expression of our decision to belong to this motley crew called “Christians.”

Charles Hoffacker writes of the “downward mobility” of Christians, in his book by the same name, using the imagery of going down under the water to talk about the seriousness of Christian baptism.

“A couple weeks ago,” write Hoffacker, “I had breakfast with a man who had served with the Marines in Vietnam. This man now operates a small business here in town. He's also involved in ministry at a prison in Macomb County. This man is not ordained, but he is baptized, baptized with the water in the name of the Trinity, and baptized also through his Vietnam service. That battlefield experience took him down, down to the bottom, down to the place of mud and stones, of blood and death.

“I don't know about you, but if I were a prison inmate sentenced to spend years inside the same four walls, I would want someone like that man there to help me. He can help a prisoner deal with the hell of confinement because he has experienced the greater hell of the Vietnam battlefield. His present ministry builds upon both of his baptisms.

“Each of us has had experiences of descent. Each of us has gone down to what has been

for us the place of mud and stones, of blood and death. It is these baptisms that have empowered us for our ministry. Our downward mobility has been a time, strange to say, when the divine voice affirms us and the Spirit enlivens us.”

Hoffacker suggests that some of those “mud and stones, blood and death” places might be, for us, such experiences as an unhappy childhood, a broken marriage, a career failure, a horrible bereavement, estrangement from a loved one, troubles of an aging body, upset with a world that's changing too fast.

Our deepest, darkest struggles can become a baptismal source of power for ministry. This is God’s intention, in naming us -- through his Son -- the beloved.

Closing.

Dr. Oscar Cullmann, German theologian, puts another spin on Jesus’ baptism. He writes, in his book, Baptism in the New Testament, "It was not a baptism of repentance for HIS sin; it was a baptism of repentance for MY sin, and yours. Just as Jesus died on the cross, not for his own sin, but for yours and mine, so also was he baptized in solidarity with, and on behalf of, you and me."

Once the symbolic act of baptism, a sign of God’s grace, has been performed – at that point in time, our Christian life begins. From that point on, we live for Christ. We commit ourselves to grow in our faith and our service to others. We commit ourselves to following where Christ leads us.

And so, on this day when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan, we reflect on its significance. We remember, with gratitude, our own baptisms. We remember that baptism is the beginning. And we recommit ourselves to the community of faith and to the work of the kingdom. Come with me to the waters. Amen.