

Sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord

Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 3:13–17

There is something almost disarming about the way this story begins. Jesus comes to John at the Jordan and asks to be baptised, and John is taken aback. John knows who Jesus is—or at least who he senses Jesus to be—and it does not make sense. This is not how things are supposed to go. The baptiser should not baptise the one who does not need baptising. The one who calls people to repentance should not be standing ankle-deep in the same muddy water as everyone else.

And yet Jesus insists. “Let it be so now,” he says, “for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.” Which is a wonderfully opaque answer. It does not explain much. It simply says: this is the way it must be.

So John agrees. He lowers Jesus into the water that has already held the confessions of soldiers and tax collectors, farmers and city folk, saints and scoundrels. Water clouded by the truth of human lives. And when Jesus comes up from that water, the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice speaks: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

It is tempting to hear this as a moment of divine approval earned—something like a reward for obedience. But the strange thing is that Jesus has not done anything yet. No sermons. No healings. No miracles. No cross. No empty tomb. This affirmation comes at the beginning, not the end. Before achievement. Before failure. Before everything.

Which tells us something important about who God is, and about who we are.

Isaiah helps us put words around it. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” God’s delight comes first. The servant’s work flows from that delight, not the other way around. God does not say, “Here is my servant, whom I will love once he proves

himself.” God says, “Here is my servant... in whom my soul delights.” Full stop.

Psalm 29 reminds us that this voice—the voice that speaks blessing over Jesus—is not a small or timid voice. It thunders over the waters. It breaks cedars. It shakes the wilderness. And yet the same voice that can splinter forests also says something as intimate as, “You are my beloved.” Power and tenderness, held together.

That matters, because many of us grew up assuming that power and tenderness could not coexist. That strength meant distance. That authority meant judgment. But here, at the Jordan, God’s power takes the form of presence, and God’s authority sounds like love spoken aloud.

Acts 10 widens the circle even further. Peter, who has spent a lifetime learning who belongs and who does not, finally says the quiet part out loud: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” God’s Spirit, it turns out, is not easily contained. It spills over boundaries of nation and custom and religious certainty. The same Spirit who descends on Jesus descends on those Peter never imagined would belong.

Which suggests that Jesus’ baptism is not only about Jesus. It is about us.

When Jesus steps into the Jordan, he steps into human life as it actually is—not as it should be, not as we wish it were, but as it is. Confused. Complicated. In need of grace. He does not hover above it. He enters it. He stands where we stand. He lets the water close over his head.

And in doing so, he sanctifies the water. All water. The Jordan, yes—but also the baptismal fonts of churches large and small. The water poured over infants who cannot yet speak. The water received by adults who come carrying long histories of faith or doubt or both. This water becomes a place where heaven opens and God speaks love into human lives.

That is why the Baptism of Our Lord is not simply a story about Jesus long ago. It is a mirror held up to our own baptism. Or, for those who

were baptised long before they can remember, it is a reminder of what was spoken over them before they had done anything at all.

“You are my beloved.”

“With you I am well pleased.”

We forget that, of course. We forget it easily. Life has a way of teaching us different lessons. That we are loved if we succeed. That we are acceptable if we behave. That we are worthy if we measure up. Even the Church, at times, has been better at reinforcing those messages than at challenging them.

But the gospel refuses to cooperate with that story. The gospel insists that belovedness comes first. Always first.

From that place, everything else unfolds. Isaiah’s servant brings justice not by shouting or crushing bruised reeds, but by faithfulness. Jesus will go on from the Jordan into the wilderness, into ministry, into conflict, into suffering—but he goes knowing who he is. The voice has already spoken. The identity is already given.

Which may be the greatest gift of baptism: not protection from difficulty, but grounding for it. Baptism does not keep Jesus from the cross. It keeps him from forgetting who he is on the way there.

And perhaps that is what it offers us as well.

Because most of us spend our lives wading through waters that are far from clear. Grief. Illness. Change. Regret. Unanswered questions. We do not need a faith that pretends those waters are shallow. We need a faith that tells us God is in them with us.

At the Jordan, God does not pull Jesus out of the water to keep him safe. God meets him there. Names him there. Loves him there.

So on this feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, we are invited to remember—not just an event in Jesus’ life, but a truth about our own. That before we do anything impressive or disappointing, before we get it right or wrong, a voice has spoken over us. That voice may be quieter now, harder to hear over the noise of the world, but it has not gone silent.

“You are my beloved.”

“With you I am well pleased.”

The rest of the story—our story, and Christ’s—flows from there