

Remember Who and Whose You Are

Matthew 3:13-17

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: Still-speaking God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us. May the words we hear become your living Word today. Help us listen to what the Spirit is saying to your church. Amen.

In his book *Without Apology*, theologian Stanley Hauerwas shares a wonderful story about Peter Storey. Storey was a white Methodist bishop who fought tirelessly against apartheid in South Africa. One evening, he and Archbishop Desmond Tutu were the guests of honor at a special celebration hosted by Black South Africans—the very people who had led the country through its long and difficult struggle for freedom.

During the party, the hosts pulled the two bishops aside and asked, “Do you know why we are throwing this party for you?”

The bishops looked at each other and gave what they thought was the obvious answer: “Because we stood with you. Because we were there during the struggle.”

But their hosts shook their heads. “No,” they said. “That’s not the reason. We are celebrating you because you **baptized** us. You told us who we were—and you remembered us when no one else did.”¹

Today is the Baptism of Christ Sunday. In our Gospel reading, we find ourselves standing at the water’s edge with Jesus. But today is about more than just a historical event in the Jordan River; it’s a day to remember our own baptism.

Before the pandemic, many churches scheduled baptisms for this specific Sunday. Perhaps some still do. But whether you are standing at a font today, or looking back across several decades, we have to ask ourselves: Why does it matter?

¹Stanley Hauerwas, “Without Apology” *Sermons for Christ’s Church*, Seabury Books, p. 85.

It matters because we live in a world that is very good at making us forget. We forget who we are. We forget who we've become through God's grace. We need the water of baptism to remind us of our true identity in Jesus Christ—*who we are and whose we are*.

Baptism has many layers of meaning, but at its foundation, it is about **identity**.

Think of Jesus at the Jordan. As he emerges from the water, a voice breaks through the heavens: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*.

Here is the radical truth of the Gospel: In your baptism, that same voice speaks over **you**. It doesn't say, "I will love you if you work harder." It says, "You are my Beloved." Period. No ifs, ands, or buts.

The late Rachel Held Evans put it perfectly: Jesus did not *begin to be* loved at the moment of his baptism. He didn't *stop* being loved when the water dried. Baptism simply gave a name to the reality of his existing, unending "belovedness."²

And it's the same for us. Baptism doesn't "earn" God's love; it declares it. Think about the power that holds for someone today who feels invisible, or unloved, or unlovable. This isn't just "self-help." This is a secure, unshakable identity that sustains us when the world tries to tear us down.

When the author of Matthew recounts Jesus' baptism, he immediately follows it with the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The devil comes with a series of "ifs." "*If you are the Son of God... do this. If you are the Son of God... prove that*" (Matt. 4:3,5). The devil was trying to make Jesus doubt his identity. We can imagine Jesus looking back and saying, "You'd better believe I'm God's Son—and a beloved one at that!"

The great reformer Martin Luther understood this struggle. Whenever he felt overwhelmed by temptation or felt the "demons" of despair closing in, he would take a piece of chalk and write two words on his desk: *Baptizatus sum*. "I am baptized." Note that he didn't say, "I was baptized," as a past-

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, as quoted by Kathryn Matthews in *Sermon Seeds, January 12, 2020*.

tense event. He said, "I am baptized." It was his shield. It was his reminder of who held his life.

Many of us know our birthdays or anniversaries, but very few of us know the date of our baptism. Do you know of anybody who celebrates the anniversary of their baptism? I read, however, of one church that celebrates baptismal anniversaries at the beginning of each month. They do it with song and prayer. They remind themselves of God's promises: salvation, forgiveness, and new life.³

Baptism is about God's promises to us.

Preaching professor Thomas Long tells a story about a woman in a Princeton hospital. She was dying of breast cancer, and she knew her time was short. One afternoon, she called her pastor with a specific request.

She said, "I need you to do something for me. I want you to bring the church leaders here—the elders—and I want you to anoint me with oil."

The pastor was taken aback. He stammered, "You want me to do... *what?*"

"I've been reading the Book of James," she explained calmly. "And it says right there: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord'" (James 5:14).

But the pastor hesitated. He came from a tradition that emphasized the mind over the mystical. He looked at her and said, "I'm sorry, but I practice ministry... not magic."

That's when she got furious. She looked him in the eye and said, "Pastor, I am *dying*."

"I understand that," he replied, "but why this? Why do you want me to come all the way there just to put oil on your forehead?"

³ Dawn Roucka, Comments to "Baptismal Problems and Promises" in *Working Preacher*, January 5, 2014.

She didn't hesitate. She said, "Because I need a sign. I need a sign that even here—in the midst of my death—the promises made at my baptism are still full, and they are still true."

That following Thursday, the pastor and the elders came. They stood around her bed, they laid their hands on her, and they anointed her with oil.⁴

Baptism is an act of consecration. It is the moment God looks at us—before we have done anything to deserve it—and says, "I see you. I know you. You are mine."

So, on this Baptism of Christ Sunday, whatever you are facing, whatever trials are tempting you to forget your worth, remember who and whose you are: *You are God's beloved.*

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁴ Tom Long, ReNew 2019 Session 1, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oxm9C8ZddrA> 46:05