

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of Our Lord
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Remember Your Baptism

As many of you know, my husband Jim is a pilgrim at heart and an adventuresome traveler. On one of his trips to the UK some years ago he planned to connect with Neil, a longtime friend, priest and artist. Neil is profoundly creative and is forever coming up with unusual and delightful things to make and to do and to see. Neil serves a parish on the outskirts of London, and whenever Jim is in the vicinity, he and Neil find a way, typically an unusual way, to get together.

On this visit, Neil suggested meeting at Piero della Francesca's painting of the Baptism of Christ in the National Gallery. While the painting on the cover of your bulletin this morning is by Verrochio and da Vinci, and hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence rather than the National Gallery in London, the paintings are remarkably similar. Jim arrived at the gallery before Neil did and made his way to the painting. He later wrote about it, saying *"I arrived first, and stood transfixed before that marvelous 15th century painting. John the Baptist pours water over Jesus as the Holy Dove hovers just overhead. They stand at the edge of the river, in the shade of a great tree. Perhaps it is the Tree of Life, planted in Paradise but growing in every thin place where earth and heaven intersect. The formality of the figures and the almost eternal sense of stillness induced a responding quietude in me."* Jim was so captivated by what was in front of him, when Neil approached and put his hand on his shoulder, he couldn't shift his gaze from the painting. "Remember your baptism," Neil whispered, and with a small vial of water drawn from his parish font, he sprinkled Holy Water on Jim's head.

While the paintings in the galleries, and Jim's baptismal encounter, and what we do in the baptismal ritual in church are all gentle sprinklings, I've always imagined John plunging people down into the dark waters of the River Jordon and pulling them back up into the light. We're told it was "just as Jesus was coming up out of the water" that the Spirit descended on him and he heard the Father's voice. So he had to have gone down into the deep waters – down to the depths and back up and into the light, something that must have felt like dying and rising, which is what we say happens in baptism. We go down into the deep waters – the sometimes dangerous waters – and die to what has been. When we surface, we are changed. God does not promise to lift us out of the surging, thrashing waters of life. But God does promise that we will not be alone. That has been true throughout all time. All of God's people throughout all salvation history have had a deep connection with water... water that purifies, water that destroys, life-giving water in the desert, water to drown in, water to die in and water to birth us anew.

When we dive into the baptismal waters, we make the same passage the people of ancient Israel made, from slavery into freedom, from outcast to belonging, from death into life. This isn't

necessarily what we're thinking about as we gingerly sprinkle water over the foreheads of beatific babies in beautiful christening gowns. But the truth is, when we baptize people, whether they be babies or grown-ups or anyone in-between, we are filled with hope for each precious child of God, filled with hope for the Body of Christ that is forever changed for having welcomed the newly baptized, filled with hope for the world that is made fresh and new in these life-giving waters. In this most ancient and significant Christian ritual, we are filled with the hope we are called to hold for the world. That's our job as Christians, you know – we are the ones who hold hope.

And while all that is true, we know that our baptism, or even our lived faith, does not protect us from the hurts and the heartaches of walking around in the world as actual human beings. Being incarnate is not easy. With all the dying and rising that being human entails, life can feel pretty rough. And still, the heavens open and God says those beautiful words "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." When Jesus heard those words he was hearing the same words God spoke to Israel through the prophets, AND the same words God speaks to you and to me. *You are my beloved...*

I wonder what Jesus felt like when he heard those words. He was, after all, fully human, remember? "You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased." Jesus hadn't even done anything yet – I mean not the things he was famous for. No miracles, no healings, no preaching or teaching. He hadn't even bested the devil in the wilderness yet. Jesus stood in line with every other outcast and sinner who wished to be washed clean and born anew and insisted on being baptized. This Jesus, who is like us in every way but without sin, lined up, took his turn and got dunked in the life-giving waters of baptism. I used to wonder why he did that. John's baptism was the baptism of repentance, and Jesus had nothing to repent of. But I don't know that Jesus actually cared about that. I think perhaps what he cared about was all those people who were lined up, who wanted to be a part of something beautiful and powerful, people who wanted to be emboldened by new life and love. I think that his dunking in the river Jordan was his first intentional act of solidarity with all of humankind. *"I belong to you, I belong with you, right here, right now, in your heart's desire to repent, to be freely forgiven, to start over, to be born anew."*

Just as God was well pleased with his beloved son Jesus before Jesus had gotten it all together and done everything he was supposed to do, God is well pleased with us before we do all that, too. We too are God's own beloved, and just like Jesus, in our intentional acts of baptism, God is well pleased. Not because we came to church and got sprinkled and not even because we made the promises. But simply because of our baptism. Because in our baptism we throw ourselves into the water with all the rest of the outcasts and sinners - the regular folks who on a good day remember that God loves us. The regular folks who know that having been baptized into the body of Christ we are no longer alone, no longer doomed to life that isn't life-giving, no longer living in fear of not getting it right. Jesus is in the river with us, and the waters shall not overwhelm.

Just like you and me, Jesus was beloved before any good got done – that is to say good beyond the unspeakable goodness and beauty of being created in God's own image and called by name.

And it seems to me that is something very, very important. We worry – I know we do – because we think our failures or our inabilities or our unwillingness or our busy-ness drives us away from God. But they don't. God is present, always and everywhere calling us by name and whispering to us that we are beloved. Whether we're struggling and sputtering in waters that are up to our necks or lazing away a summer's day with our feet dangling in a babbling brook, God is there, urging, and encouraging us on.

All that blessing, all that belovedness, all that honor and preciousness that God tells us so plainly is real, is also purposeful. The fact that we are honored and precious and beloved before we DO ANYTHING is purposeful. It means we can know there is nothing we can do to make God love us and nothing we can do that will keep God from loving us. It reminds us that we are inherently loveable and loved, before we ever think a kind thought or do a kind deed. Do you see? Jesus was God's beloved before he did anything and so are we. And if we let it, that knowledge can free us from the self-consciousness that keeps us thinking we're too small, too insignificant, too unimportant to change the world. But just like Jesus, in our baptisms we find that we blessed and beloved and that we already have everything we need to go out into the world and pour out justice and peace and forgiveness and hope and love without worrying about how it's going to go or whether we'll be approved of at the end of the day. Jesus' baptism was the inauguration of his earthly ministry, just as our baptisms are the beginnings of our own ministries. For us, just as for Jesus, baptism is a beginning, not an end.

Yes, we renounce things and turn away from things when we are baptized, but our baptisms anoint us for our work in the world. We are so much more baptized into, than out of. Into a loving community that promises to do everything possible to support each other in our lives in Christ. We are baptized into the body of Christ, taking our place, offering our gifts, seeing ourselves as a part of something that cannot possibly be whole until everyone is welcomed in. In baptism, we keep covenant with God, yes. But we also keep covenant with each other. And at some deep and rich and very real level, we recognize that the body of Christ is forever and wonderfully changed by each person who is newly baptized.

Our baptism, like the baptism of Christ, is an ordination to a life of mission, service, and self-offering, making us the ones who are chosen and sent, the ones who come into the fullness of ourselves by giving ourselves away. Once we are baptized and incorporated into the Body of Christ, our lives are no longer our own. We belong to Jesus, and we make him known in the particular ways only we can. So remember your baptism, my dears. Remember your baptism. Amen.