

Come, Holy Spirit, giver of gifts: open our ears to hear you speak to us. Amen.

Here we are at the river again, as we always are the second Sunday in January. Every year on this Sunday we retell this story of Jesus' baptism, just as we retell the stories of his birth, his passion, his death, his rising again. Why is this event up there with those? Because baptism is at the very heart of everything we are as ones who call ourselves Christians. Being a Christian is not so much about what we do. It's more a matter of who we are, our identity, the family we belong to, the God who claims us. That identity = began in the water of the Jordan River.

What happened to Jesus in that river? According to all four gospels, He went into the water with the others John was baptizing there. And as he emerged from it, while he was praying, something with bodily form seemed to come out of heaven and land on him, something that looked like a dove. All four gospels agree that it was the Holy Spirit. There was also an "auditory phenomenon" as well as a visual one: A voice was heard saying, "*This is my son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*" Now, some early manuscripts of Luke read, "*This is my son, whom I have begotten this day,*" a reading that conveys more a sense of a birth narrative, a second birth. And didn't Jesus say to Nicodemus, "Unless you are born anew, by water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the Kingdom?"

To the early Christians reading these accounts, this story is full of clues that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, the Christ, which means "the anointed one," Christ from the word for chrism, oil. And for the early church, it was clear: in this event the Trinity was manifest: The Father affirming the identity of the Son; the Son beginning his ministry; The Spirit coming in fullness upon the Son.

Now, it's not like Jesus didn't have the Spirit before – our scriptures tell us He was conceived by the Spirit. He was protected by the Spirit. But it seems that here Jesus received the fullness of the Holy Spirit, his own true Spirit, in a new way, in a way that was to empower his remarkable ministry and enable Him to live out his mission, even to the cross. Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, and nothing was the same again.

He never went back home – he just went forward into his mission.
Jesus' ministry began that water. So do ours.

When we are baptized, even if it's just sprinkled, we are dipped into that river,
submerged in that water; we come up and are anointed by holy oil,
Signifying the Holy Spirit coming upon us to anoint us for our ministry.
And I believe we also hear, deep in our spirits, the voice of the Father saying,
"This is my beloved child. With her I am well pleased."

But what happens after our baptism, for most of us?
We often leave the river behind. We dry up, and forget to live in the river.
We can forget about the anointing for ministry, busying ourselves with work and
life, family and career. And that voice of affirmation deep in our spirits can get
crowded out by all kinds of other voices, some deeply unaffirming, some
downright critical, some inviting us not to believe, not to trust, not to hope.

What are the things, experiences, people, preoccupations in your life
that have caused you to leave the riverbed of your baptism?
Can we bring all that baggage back to the river, and allow the fire of the Spirit
to burn away what is not holy, and the water cleanse and redeem all that is?
Can we allow ourselves to be reborn by water and the Spirit?
Can we "live in the river?"

This river, where the Son was anointed by the Spirit and affirmed by the Father,
this river has life beyond that moment and that geographical location.
This river, this stream, this Jordan runs all the way here,
runs all the way through our lives.
Our stepping into it is not only a one-time, symbolic movement when we are
baptized. We step into this river Jordan every time we exercise faith.

Exercising faith, prayer, is stepping into a stream that is always moving through
our lives. Jesus told the woman at the well that the living water he gives
is like a spring inside us, welling up eternally.
This living water is Jordan water that we can live in, live into, carry with us.
But we need to be conscious about coming back to the river,
that root of our Christian identity.

What happens for us in baptism? At least five things.

We are adopted into God's family, with all the rights and privileges of heirs.

We are welcomed into this community of sinner-saints transforming the world.

We are forgiven our sins and the self-orientation that leads us to sin.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit with gifts and power beyond our imagining.

And we are claimed as God's own, given a new identity, an eternal identity, as beloved, as child of God.

I listened to an interview with Bishop Tutu, and he talked about preaching to his congregation in a poor township in South Africa, to men and women oppressed by centuries of white supremacy and brutality enshrined in law, who were rarely addressed as people by their white bosses, but called generic "Mama" or "Boy." He told them to say, when anyone asked who they were, "I am a beloved child of God."

Friends, we all have identities thrown at us, especially these days.

Are we red or blue? Are we religious or secular? Working or unemployed?

Are maskers and vaxxers or anti? Pro-choice or anti-abortion? Rich or poor?

Do we root our identity in our family, or where we live, or what we do?

What if we claimed our primal identity as "Beloved child of God?"

What if we lived out of that identity? What a difference we might make!

Could we start every morning with this reminder?

This is so far from our normal, we'd have to create a habit. So here's a thought:

We all brush our teeth in the morning, right? Usually in front of a mirror.

What if while we do that we look into that mirror and say,

"I am a beloved child of God." Or "You are a beloved child of God."

And if you encounter someone else in your house say,

"You are a beloved child of God." And if you're in traffic, or at a meeting, say to others, "You are a beloved child of God."

They can't even hear you, but something has changed. You've worded them.

The root of Jesus' ministry was in this moment when that Holy Spirit

came upon him and God declared him his beloved Son. A claim of relationship.

The root of those Samaritans' ministry was when they received the Holy Spirit.

Each one of us has had that moment, whether or not we remember it.

Each one of us has received that Holy Spirit and brought into relationship.

[Pick up bowl.]

Come to the river again, beloved.

[Pour water into bowl.]

Come and be reminded of the feel of its water on your thirsty skin.

Come and be anointed by the Spirit for the mission and ministry to which God is calling you, uniquely of all people, to serve with your mix of gifts and circumstances, to exercise your faith for healing and renewal.

Come and hear the voice of your heavenly God-parent saying,

“This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Today I am giving you life.”

Let the river flow.

Amen.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming;

I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Acts 8:14-17

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.